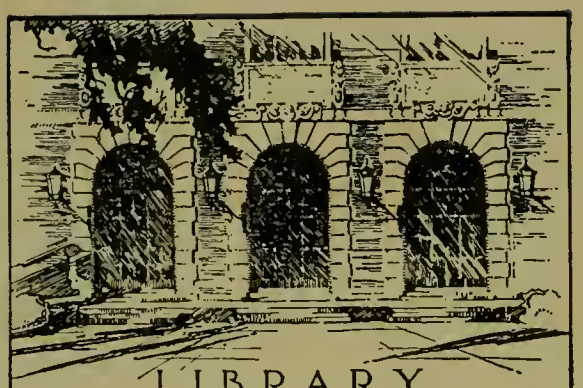

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THE WRONG ROAD

THE WRONG ROAD

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BY

MAJOR ARTHUR GRIFFITHS

AUTHOR OF

'FAST AND LOOSE,' 'LOCKED UP,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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THE WRONG ROAD.

CHAPTER XXV.

BEFORE THE BENCH.

The re-examination of the prisoner, Ferdinand Levallois St Evelyn, as he was charged, was somewhat prolonged. It occupied the whole of one day, not only because the facts were slowly elicited, but because Mr Amos Davis, the prisoner's attorney, fought and contested every point, inch by inch. Mr Davis had followed in his father's footsteps as the head of one of the most lucrative of Old Bailey practices, but his talents were those of the

advocate, especially as regards cross-examination, and he would assuredly have risen to great eminence at the Bar.

The prosecution had been taken up by the Treasury, which was represented as usual by Serjeant Frankfort. They had often met thus in the preliminaries of a great *cause célèbre*, and it was little Amos Davis's boast that he had always held his own against the great Queen's Counsel. They met once more in the little sessional court of Market Reepham: a pair of opponents in strong contrast; the sharp ferret-faced solicitor with his black restless eyes, and the ponderous, slow-moving, deliberate-speaking barrister, in whose stolid astuteness lay his chief strength.

Serjeant Frankfort did not wish, before the magistrates, to prove too much; enough to secure committal, that was all he attempted. Mr Davis, on the other hand, wished the prosecution to show its whole game: the line of attack, the good cards on which it counted, and the way they were to be played.

The first witnesses were called to prove the cause of the young baronet's death, the course his illness ran, the attitude of his relations and others at the Hall.

St Evelyn's disapproval of Lady Lezaire's resolve to call in medical aid was elicited, although Mr Davis objected, only to be overruled. He objected also, but vainly, to evidence showing St Evelyn's animus against his poor little brother-in-law; and he defiantly, indeed impudently, bearded the whole Bench when it proposed to listen to Mr Tinson in support of the theory that the Colonel had a deep interest in the young baronet's death.

All this was mere surmise, Mr Davis contended scornfully; vague, unjust innuendo, unsupported conjecture.

He was less jaunty when Mr Earswick, the detective, was put into the box. The story now told brought suspicion more closely home to the Colonel. Every one in court—Bench, Bar, audience; poor little Mrs St Evelyn, with her scared sorrowful face; even the prisoner, al-

though outwardly stern and impassive—listened with breathless interest to the police officer.

The reader knows already what he had to tell: the discovery of the poison-label in various pieces—one in the very chamber of the crime, another in St Evelyn's private study; the clue thereby obtained; its pursuit straight into the chemist's shop at Cleobury.

"The rope's round his neck now," whispered General Wyndham-Parker, with sardonic satisfaction, to a neighbour on the bench, Mr Etherly.

Then the poison-book was produced, and the Colonel's signature to the damning entry was sworn to by Mr Tinson.

"It's tightening," said the spiteful little General.

Mr Gravely was called, a timid, weak-kneed witness, but he was positive as to the purchase of the arsenic by Colonel St Evelyn.

"By the prisoner?" asked Mr Davis, with a fierce incredulity that shock Mr Gravely instantly.

"Ye—ye—s; by Colonel St Evelyn. By the prisoner, I mean. To the best of my belief, at least."

"Your belief!" Mr Davis looked up at the Bench, and then around the court, saying, quite plainly, but without words, "What can this poor creature's belief be worth?"

"How did you know him? Did you see his face?"

"Yes—or part of his face. He wore a large muffler."

"Did you hear his voice?"

"Ye—ye—s. I heard his voice. He asked me for the arsenic."

"How often had you heard him speak before?"

The witness was not sure.

"Half-a-dozen times?"

No answer.

"Four times—three times—twice—once? Did you ever hear his voice in your life? Come, be careful. You are on your oath; your words have a terrible, an awful importance—a

man's life depends upon them. Now tell me, on your oath, have you ever heard the prisoner, Colonel St Evelyn's, voice before?"

"Yes, once; once. I am quite certain of that."

"And where, pray?"

"Here, in this very court. He was on the bench, and he spoke to me——"

"Was he giving judgment?"

"Yes."

"Against whom? Go on. I insist, the Bench insists, on knowing."

"Against me,"—in a very low voice. "I was summoned for an infraction of the Patent Medicines Act."

"You were found guilty, eh? And sentenced—to imprisonment?"

"Oh dear, no; only to a fine."

"And this is your only ground for recognising the Colonel's voice, or indeed himself. That will do, Mr Gravely," said Mr Davis, in a voice of deep dejection, as though overwhelmed at the turpitude of this weak fellow-creature.

"Not so tight as you imagined, eh, Parker?" chuckled Mr Etherly.

"One moment," interposed Serjeant Frankfort. "You had other reasons, Mr Gravely, I think, for recognising—for being sure it was Colonel St Evelyn?"

"I knew him by his coat."

Mr Davis and his client interchanged glances. The testimony of the coat, a great point in the case, was to have been reserved at this preliminary examination.

"What kind of coat?"

"An Inverness, they call it, I think. Of striped plaid, yellow and red; rather staring pattern."

"You had seen the Colonel wear it?"

"Frequently, when he drove through Cleobury."

"I shall call other witnesses to speak to that coat, and the Colonel's fondness for it," said Serjeant Frankfort, but the remark was hardly necessary. Dozens of people on the bench and in the body of the court knew the Colonel's favourite Inverness.

"It ought to be produced," said Lord Prudhames. "The witness should be asked if he recognises it."

"I am afraid, my lord, that is not possible. I hereby give notice to the other side to produce that coat," he said, looking hard at the prisoner. "But it will not be put in. We must not, do not expect it. The coat will not be produced, for the simple reason that it has disappeared. Its disappearance is a part, and a strong part, of our case, my lord."

Mr Davis exchanged glances with the prisoner, and rose to his feet.

"I object most distinctly to the line Serjeant Frankfort is pursuing. It is irregular —very irregular. The question of the coat is not before the Court."

"We can easily bring it before the Court. Recall Alfred Earswick."

The detective stepped back into the box, and was made to tell the story of his search for the Inverness in the Colonel's dressing-room.

"You could not find the greatcoat. No.

No one will find that coat, I am pretty well convinced of that. But I give notice to produce it — and — and"— the Serjeant looked leisurely at his notes, turning them over page by page—"and—the Colonel's private diary."

It was a home-thrust, suddenly and unexpectedly delivered.

"What diary?" asked Mr Davis, blankly. "I am at a loss to understand——"

"You cannot deny the diary, Mr Davis. Its existence will be sworn to."

Earswick was recalled, and described his second visit to the Colonel's study the morning after he had overhauled the wardrobe up-stairs.

"What was your object?" asked the Serjeant.

"I was looking for some clue to the Colonel's daily movements."

"And did you come upon any?"

"Well, yes; what I wanted was there—I am sure of that. But I was not able to investigate it thoroughly. Gibbings came in and found me

with a book in my hand. We had words, and I had to give the book up."

"What was the book? Do you remember?"

"Perfectly: the Colonel's diary. I opened it and read several entries bearing, I think, upon the case—about his journeys and what he did. I caught the word Cleobury, I think——"

"Aha! That will do for the present."

The Serjeant looked at the Bench. "You know now, my lord, why the production of the diary is important."

"It shall be produced," said Mr Amos Davis quietly, but with a tinge of uneasiness. He had been whispering to his client during the last few minutes, and the answer had been evidently prompted by the Colonel. The lawyer was not satisfied that it was wise to yield the point. He had experience of diaries read in open court, and knew how embarrassing the entries often proved.

The case for the prosecution was now closed, and Serjeant Frankfort in a forcible speech told the Bench it was their bounden duty to

commit the prisoner for trial at the coming assizes.

"One word, my lord," said Mr Amos Davis, rising, and holding a small volume in his hand, the leaves of which he had been turning over and reading with close attention. "The learned Serjeant has expressed a wish that my client's private diary should be put in."

"Yes, if it can be found," said Serjeant Frankfort, with a sneer.

"My client has every desire to further the ends of justice, and as regards the diary, is fortunately able to comply with the request of the other side. It is here. We sent for it directly the question was raised."

"May I see it?" asked the Serjeant, putting out his hand.

"It is for the information and satisfaction of the Court, to whom I now surrender it," said Mr Davis, quite ignoring his opponent. "I give it up to you, my lord, but I beg that it may be at once sealed with the seal of the Court, and safely kept till required."

"Do you produce the Inverness also?" asked the Serjeant, determined to have the last word. But Mr Davis did not choose to reply.

"You have nothing more to say?" asked Lord Prudhames. "No?" And then he whispered a word to the magistrate on each side of his chair; the message passed both ways along the Bench, and was answered by affirmative nods.

"Colonel St Evelyn," — the chairman now addressed the prisoner,—"it does not beseem me, nor does your present deeply painful position call for any remarks from the Bench. I have only to inform you, in the briefest and most formal manner, that we think a sufficient case has been made out to warrant your full committal for trial. Let the prisoner be removed."

The governor of the jail stepped forward, and with a look of infinite distress upon his hard, weather-beaten old face, offered his patron an arm.

"No, thank you. Go first: I will follow.

You need not fear. I shall not try to run away." And the Colonel, with a nod to the Bench, and a half smile, walked out, upright and unconcerned.

There was a slight attempt at a cheer among the throng in the body of the court and outside. The Colonel was not unpopular with the people; he was a sportsman, and had kept money moving about Straddlethorpe.

Besides, Gibbings was there, and the mob followed his lead when he characterised the whole prosecution as a dirty plot that was bound to recoil on those—"I won't mention names, but a nod's as good as a wink,—it'll all come back, I say, on those who planned it."

On the bench, opinions were decidedly hostile to St Evelyn. Only old Etherly and one or two more still doubted.

"That man is not guilty. I have watched every move on his face," said old Etherly.

"Bah! He has nerves of iron," replied the General, spitefully. "Besides, looks don't prove innocence."

"He'll slip through your fingers yet, General," said the first speaker.

"Don't you believe he did it?" retorted the General, turning sharply on his brother magistrate.

"I do not believe he did. What is more, I do not believe that any Market Reepham jury will convict him on such evidence as we have had to-day."

"Then there will be a grave miscarriage of justice, and it will be a disgrace to the whole country."

"It would be so if we hanged an innocent man."

"Stuff and nonsense! But come, let me ask you one question: if he didn't murder the lad, who did?"

"If that's your only line of argument your case must be weak indeed," said Mr Etherly.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MARKET REEPHAM ASSIZES.

The summer Assizes were held at Market Reepham some six weeks later. Her Majesty's judges were received with something of old-fashioned pomp and circumstance in this respectable city. The High Sheriff, in a brand-new uniform, met them in a state carriage with lackeys in blue and silver, and the procession from the station to the judges' lodging was escorted by tipstaves and javelin-men in quaint ancient costumes.

The judge who presided in the criminal court had never come to the Thorpeshire Circuit before, and he told the grand jury at the opening of the Assize that their attendance

in such numbers to discharge their public duties was an honour to the county, and might be held up as an example to the local magistracy everywhere. He hoped as many as found it convenient would dine with him at his lodgings that night.

But the Thorpeshire magnates had not come to be asked to dinner; nor was it purely public spirit that crowded the grand-jury box that Assize. They had come to hear the great *cause célèbre*, to take their part in the proceedings, and when they had found a true bill, as was inevitable, to see how St Evelyn behaved.

The court was densely packed with people; all the galleries, every inch of standing-room in the body of the court. In the former were several ladies, great ones too; a duchess and leader of fashion had come down from London on purpose, seeking a new sensation in watching narrowly the demeanour of a man she knew when being tried for his life.

Compared to hers, the motives—bitter hatred

and consuming thirst for vengeance — that brought Lady Lezaire were legitimate, or at least excusable.

Colonel St Evelyn bore his position with the same easy self-possessed air he had shown at his first examination. He looked slowly round the court when first brought into the dock, noting who was present, with now a half smile, now a whole sneer, as his eye rested on each in turn. With Lady Lezaire he exchanged fierce glances; he gave the duchess a pleasant off-hand nod which quite disconcerted her.

The trial followed its usual course. St Evelyn, on arraignment, pleaded "Not guilty" in a firm voice, which had its effect on all present.

But Serjeant Frankfort's opening, setting forth the whole of the facts—circumstantial in the main, but supported by certain tangible evidence—soon removed any impression favourable to the prisoner. The case looked more and more black against him as it proceeded. Witness after witness was called to give the

testimony already reported in the preceding chapter.

The prisoner's counsel was a Mr Harry Blackstone, a very jaunty young barrister, with a rising reputation on circuit; a round-faced, rosy-cheeked, smiling, good-tempered man, who was soon on excellent terms with the jury. His habit was to treat matters lightly, as though the charge was all a mistake, the indictment a mere joke, and this system served him well in the present case.

His line in cross-examination was ridicule. He made great fun of Earswick the detective, and his disguises.

"You called yourself a lawyer's clerk, eh? And dressed the part? Have you ever been on the stage?"

"No."

"Were you brought up to anything—before you took to the police?"

"Medicine."

"Oho! The blue paper and the poison-label was all in your line, then. At a chemist's?

Or, I beg your pardon, at the Veterinary College?"

"No; at St Bartholomew's."

"But you never took your diploma?"

"Pardon me, I did."

"And you'd rather be a detective than a doctor? Curious preference that. Think you have a special talent for investigation, perhaps?"

"I like the solution of problems, I confess."

"Hence the very ingenious theory you have started in this case. Pleasant practice, constructing theories which may cost a fellow-creature his life. That will do, Mr Earswick."

And for the first time the police officer felt crestfallen and dissatisfied with the part he had played.

The great card with the prosecution, however, was Mr Gravely the chemist. The purchase of the poison was its strong point, and everything depended upon the identification of the accused.

Mr Tinson spoke first to the signature in the

poison-book. It was compared with other authenticated signatures, and then an expert was called in corroboration.

"The handwriting is the same—to the best of my belief," said the expert, with some qualification.

"Cannot you speak quite positively?"

"No. It is probably the same, more than probably—but not, in my opinion, certainly—the same."

"Thank you," said Mr Blackstone, with a grateful laugh. "That will do. I shall not cross-examine you."

With Mr Gravely he was very different.

"Are you fond of music?" he asked, quite abruptly.

"M' lud, I really must protest——" began Serjeant Frankfort.

"I crave your patience, m' lud," retorted Mr Blackstone, and again he turned to the witness.

"What instrument do you play? The piano, hautboy, jew's-harp? or do you only whistle? Come!"

"I don't understand, sir," faltered Mr Gravely.

"Answer me. Are you a good musician? Have you a good ear for music?"

"I don't know any music."

"You have no ear?"

"No ear for music, sir. I am not very quick of hearing, indeed."

"Have you a good memory?"

"Yes, I think so."

"For faces?"

"Well, I'm not so sure, sir."

"How often have you seen Colonel St Evelyn? Once?"

"Twice, sir."

"The first time?"

"On the bench; the second, in my shop."

"You remembered him, then: you can swear to that? After dark—a man you had only seen once before."

"I thought I recognised him. I knew his coat."

"You are not perfectly sure?"

"As sure as I could be of anything. He said he was Colonel St Evelyn, too."

"He might have *said* he was the Duke of Wellington, or the Pope of Rome. What I want to know is, whom do you say he was?"

"I thought it was Colonel St Evelyn, sir. I did indeed."

And that was all Mr Blackstone could extract from the witness. Yet the impression left was certainly one of doubt. Mr Gravely was hardly positive as to the identity of the purchaser of the poison.

"Well, now, let me try this famous memory of yours another way. The occasion on which you sold this arsenic is, I hope, fresh in your memory?"

"Perfectly."

"And exactly the time of sale? Do you remember that?"

"Pretty exactly. It was towards evening."

"After dark?"

"No, only dusk; about seven o'clock."

"Not later; are you sure?"

"It would be about seven. I had had my tea."

"You must be very particular about this. The exact time, I must have, to a moment, if possible."

"It was seven, sir, I am quite sure."

"Well, I will take your word for it, and I hope his lordship and the gentlemen of the jury will do the same. Your accuracy in this respect may be of very considerable importance, Mr Gravely. That will do for the present."

The remainder of the prosecution dealt with the other evidence—the negative evidence, so to speak, of damaging conjecture rather than fact.

The samples of horse medicine prescribed by the Colonel were produced, and the chemical analysis, which distinctly contradicted any pretence that arsenic was an ingredient. If St Evelyn used the drug in his medicaments, it was not for his own horses.

Again testimony was adduced to emphasise the absence of the Inverness. What had become of it? Let the defence produce it, or say where it had gone. Failing this, only one inference was possible — namely, that it had been intentionally made away with.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DEFENCE.

The defence set up by Mr Blackstone followed his usual method. He was off-handed, almost flippant in tone, laughing the whole thing to scorn.

"The prosecution is weak, miserably weak," he cried, "and must break down, for this, if for no other reason. There has not been the slightest attempt to show that the prisoner actually administered poison to the deceased—if poison was administered at all; and here again the evidence has absolutely failed. You cannot, gentlemen of the jury, you must not ignore such glaring flaws as these.

"But I wish you to realise all the glaring

weaknesses and inconsistencies of the evidence. It is in the main artificial evidence, if I may use the word, — manufactured on purpose—of course I do not say maliciously—but on purpose to back up and bear out the attack made. An aspiring, I may say a clever, detective has arrived at a certain conclusion, based on a possibility, perhaps, but a most misleading one, and all that has been adduced has been worked in to fit.

"We have been told that the prisoner and his young brother-in-law were bad friends—a reason for murdering him. That through his wife he would inherit all the Straddlethorpe property — a stronger reason for murdering him. That when the blow, the cruel dastardly blow, had been struck, the prisoner threw every difficulty in the way of attempting recovery—a last convincing proof of homicidal intent.

"Thus the criminal was found ready to hand. Evidence of his guilt—a small matter, of course —alone was wanting.

"It was most ingeniously obtained by Mr

Earswick, the detective: I compliment him most sincerely on his constructive skill.

"But what is it all worth? You will, I think, agree with me that everything turns upon that visit to the Cleobury chemist on the evening of the 29th of April; that is the most material, nay, the most vital point of the case.

"Now what are the facts as they have been adduced? A gentleman, pass me the word, a magistrate of the county, a person of position, well known, and till now generally respected, wishes to purchase some arsenic—for an evil purpose, says the prosecution. How does he go about it? Secretly? To a remote spot—to London, or the other end of the county?

"Not at all. He puts on a favourite overcoat, one of a bold, indeed obtrusive pattern, which is universally known by sight; and thus advertised, he walks into a chemist's shop not a dozen miles from Straddlethorpe Hall.

"He wants arsenic—not strychnine, or morphia, or any of the more insidious lethal drugs that kill without much show; but arsenic, the

'bungler's poison,' the weapon of the common ignoramus who does not know that its traces are tell-tale and not to be escaped.

"He buys it over the counter, in his own name; he signs that name without hesitation in the book kept for the purpose, and before a second witness.

"Such is the story put forward; such are the facts alleged. Let us look into the facts; let us examine the story.

"The main question is obviously one of identification: first of the individual, and next of his handwriting. I will dispose of the latter at once, because it is the simplest.

"Mr Tinson has told you that it is the prisoner's signature; you have had other authentic signatures to compare with it. But I must impress upon you that neither Mr Tinson nor yourselves are competent to decide this point. It is a technical point, dependent really upon a professional opinion—the opinion of one who has made handwritings a study. That opinion you have had; an expert has been in

the box, and he has told you he is not certain the signature in the book is Colonel St Evelyn's. He himself is not satisfied of it; and I warn you that where he, a professional expert, is in doubt, you would be very wrong to make up your minds.

"But that is a minor matter, as I have said. The question of personal identification is the real issue.

"Now this, gentlemen, depends on a single witness. You have heard him in the box. A poor creature, weak-kneed and simple-minded, this Mr Gravely; not necessarily devoid of credence, but by no means clear and positive in the testimony he offers.

"He tells you he knew the prisoner, recognised him as Colonel St Evelyn. How? Why?

"By his voice? But he had only heard that voice once before, and under rather unpleasant conditions. He admitted too, under cross-examination, that he had no ear for music, no quick apprehension of sound; that, indeed, he was rather hard of hearing.

"By his face? A sufficiently remarkable face, perhaps — you can judge for yourselves. But the witness also admitted that he only saw a part of it, that the rest was covered up by a large muffler.

"This is the only testimony of identification. The other witness to the sale, Mr Gravely's son, is not called, and I can only conclude it is because he cannot speak to Colonel St Evelyn, although, if this be the case, he has been guilty of a misdemeanour.

"Are you going to convict a man of murder, to take away his life, to burden your own consciences with the guilt of judicial murder, on no more satisfactory grounds than these?

"Gentlemen, I will spare you that everlasting, ineradicable reproach. I will dispose of all these doubts. I will explain the chemist's hesitation, the expert's denial of the signature, the disappearance of the Inverness. I will satisfy you, I venture to assert, on all these points. My case is simply this. I can prove to you, I hope, beyond dispute, that

the prisoner, Colonel St Evelyn, never went to Cleobury at all."

It was a *coup de théâtre* which produced a sensation in the court.

"Call William Gibbings," went on Mr Blackstone.

The Colonel's servant, dressed in a neat suit of iron-grey dittoes, with a gold horse-shoe pin in his white scarf, stepped smartly into the box, and stood at attention before the judge.

After the usual preliminary questions, the witness was asked—

"Do you remember the 29th of April last?"

"I think so, sir."

"Is there anything particular that would fix that day and its occurrences in your memory?"

"Yes, sir. We bought the roan cob, 'Strawberry Leaf,' that day."

"Who bought it? You?"

"I and the Colonel together, sir; at Clungunford Farm."

"You accompanied your master to Clungun-

ford? Yes? Did you go over from Straddlethorpe?"

"Yes, sir, in the afternoon, after lunch. Reached it about four."

"And left it?"

"At five or half-past."

"Returning to Straddlethorpe?"

"Not direct, sir. We took the moorland road, round by Clutton Fells, to try the new cob. He was in the shafts."

"What is the distance from Clungunford, by Clutton, to Straddlethorpe?"

"A matter of eighteen miles."

"What time was it when you reached the Hall?"

"Close on eight."

"And now, tell me: how does Cleobury lie with reference to Clungunford and Straddlethorpe?"

"It's on the far side of the Hall."

"To get to Cleobury from Clungunford, you'd have to pass through Straddlethorpe?"

"It's the straightest road. There's another

way, up by North Bitchburn, but it's a long way round."

"How many miles?"

"Six or seven and twenty."

"Leaving Clungunford at 5, or 5.30, you could not reach Cleobury at 7?"

"Not by neither road. Nor yet by 8."

Several jurymen nodded their heads at this. They were all Thorpeshire men, and knew its roads and distances by heart.

"One word more. There is a line and railway communication between Straddlethorpe and Cleobury. Could a person leave Clungunford at five, drive to Straddlethorpe, and reach Cleobury about seven by catching any train?"

"The last train in the evening between Straddlethorpe and Cleobury is a few minutes before six."

The importance of this unexpected evidence for the defence was not to be overrated. But there was more in corroboration.

First of all, the Colonel's diary was called for and put up. Its entries, at the counsel's re-

quest, were read for several days previous to the 29th April. On that day the entry ran as follows:—

"Heard from Gamaliel about the last acceptance. He's quite unconscionable. Peters complains of the last lot of oats—because he did not buy them.

"Went with Gibbings to Clungunford. Tried Farmer Holt's roan cob; bought him for forty guineas. Not dear: well ribbed up, 15 hands, and rising six. Drove him home by Clutton Fells, eighteen miles, in a little over two hours."

Farmer Holt was called next and proved the sale, about the 29th April. He was a little shaky as to the exact date, but he was certain that the Colonel and his man drove off with the new purchase by the road to Clutton Fells.

"That, gentlemen, is the prisoner's defence," said Mr Blackstone, in a joyous, laughing manner which soon became more serious. "I have proved an *alibi*, one of the clearest and most incontrovertible *alibis* that ever saved an innocent man. The prisoner, gentlemen, is more

than merely innocent of this black crime; he is the victim of some foul villany, the black wickedness of which must some day stand forth fully revealed. That the chemist's visitor was not the prisoner, now most unjustly arraigned, but some one personating him—in his own Inverness abstracted for that very purpose—may be taken as proved. So far that person remains unknown; his actual purpose is also unknown; but we may fairly conclude it was intended to shift responsibility or raise false suspicions for dastardly, if not absolutely criminal, ends. Retribution will certainly overtake him; even if he escapes the justice of man, he will assuredly be brought to judgment above."

This solemn peroration from an advocate whose favourite manner was burlesque and *persiflage*, evidently impressed the jury. Upon the shrewd old judge it had no visible effect; but Serjeant Frankfort, usually so stolid and impassive, who had long been fidgeting in his seat, exchanging whispers with Mr Tinson or

the Treasury solicitor, and noisily turning over the pages of his brief, rose in manifest wrath.

"I altogether protest," he began sharply, "against the line taken by the counsel for the prisoner. They have sprung a mine on us without notice or warning. I ought to have claimed an adjournment, but I hope, by postponing my cross-examination until now, that I shall be able to demolish the defence, and disabuse your minds, gentlemen, of any false impression raised by the opposite side's contention. He would have you believe that the prisoner himself did not go to Cleobury. Well, I am ready to concede so much. He may have been personated by another. Why not by another on his behalf? What if it can be shown that this unknown and mysterious personage, according to Mr Blackstone—but not so utterly unknown, I contend—was acting as the prisoner's agent and bailee? Recall William Gibbings."

"Now, sir!" He turned sharply on Gibbings, who met his fierce glance and sharp speech unabashed and undismayed. "Answer

my questions, truthfully and without beating about the bush."

"I mean to do so," replied Gibbings stoutly —"there is no need to tell me that."

"We shall see. Now, tell me, how long have you been in the prisoner's service?"

"Fifteen years."

"You were in the same regiment with him. Were you his servant then?"

"Yes. The Colonel picked me out soon after I was dismissed recruit-drill."

"And you have been with him ever since? Do you get good wages? What is your place worth?"

"I have no wish to change. The Colonel has always been very good to me."

"And you give him implicit devotion in return. Such fidelity is quite touching. But we must be a little more precise. What are your wages? I repeat."

"Seventy, and three suits a-year."

"New? Made to order? Don't the Colonel's old clothes come your way?"

"Yes; they have always been my perquisite."

"Do they require much altering?"

"No; I can wear them mostly as they are."

"Indeed! In fact, you and the Colonel are much of a size: same height, same build?"

"I believe so."

"Remarkable coincidence that," said the Serjeant with meaning, as he looked shrewdly at the jury, and paused. Then twisting his wisp of a gown afresh round his big body, and giving his small wig a new toss on his big head, he proceeded.

"You were greatly trusted by the Colonel, I understand—in all his secrets, quite his confidential man, eh?"

"I can't say that. But he often gave me private jobs to do."

"You went messages? Paid his bills, settled for him with betting men, and so forth?"

"I have done all that—at different times."

"And rendered him an account, I suppose, —a true and faithful account?"

"I hope so."

"Verbally: in writing: how?"

"Not in writing; I can count up, make figures a bit, but I can't write—not a line."

In spite of the control he exercised over himself, the old Serjeant's face fell. The whole fabric of fresh implication he had so cunningly contrived at once collapsed and fell to the ground.

He would not yield his point, however, quite without a struggle. Paper and ink were called for, and the witness was desired by the jury to show what he could do. Gibbings went to work with the best will in the world, but the result was a scrawl like that of an imitative monkey, or an uneducated child.

Gibbings could not have signed the poison register. It was not he that had personated Colonel St Evelyn.

The prosecution was worsted: that was evident from the last despairing efforts made by Serjeant Frankfort. He dwelt on the hesita-

tion of Farmer Holt as to the date of the sale of the roan horse; he laughed at the diary and its entries, which might have been made at any time long after the event; he stigmatised Gibbings's evidence as though the witness had already been convicted of perjury.

But there was no getting over the one broad fact—that at the time the chemist Gravely swore the prisoner was in his shop buying arsenic, he, Colonel St Evelyn, according to another man's oath, was in a dogcart at least twenty miles away.

The latter evidence came no doubt from an adherent, a creature, possibly, of the Colonel's; but there was nothing adduced to impugn his credibility, and it must be difficult for the jury to ignore such direct testimony.

This in a few words was the judge's summing up. There was doubt, more than doubt, in favour of the prisoner, and by every principle of law and justice he must have the benefit of it.

The jury took time to deliberate; they did not return to the court for three hours. But when they appeared, "Not guilty" was the verdict, as all who had followed the trial expected.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.

The great Thorpeshire *cause célèbre* did not end with the trial. The *pros* and *cons*, the prosecution and defence, the whole of the evidence, —all these were fully and minutely discussed throughout the country and beyond.

Local opinion was divided, but it was mostly unfavourable to St Evelyn. The malcontents, as usual, made most noise, and as they were led by the spiteful garrulity of General Wyndham-Parker, it was not strange that the hostile view prevailed.

That Gibbings had forsworn himself was pretty generally believed. People even went so far as to give the exact price he had been

paid. Five hundred pounds down, and the goodwill of the "Cow and Pail"; not dear: surely it was well worth all that to escape hanging.

St. Evelyn had escaped—narrowly. His life was saved, but was it worth saving? He was still branded with the mark of Cain. White-washed, but not absolved; acquitted, but still suspected. His future lot in life was scarcely enviable. He might be exonerated by the letter of the law, but he was still condemned by common report. People would look askance at him, would hesitate to give him their hands.

"What would he do? Leave the country? Remain to brazen it out, if possible to live it down?" This was what every one was asking.

It was a question no one would have had the hardihood or impertinence to put to St Evelyn. But the reader shall be admitted to his confidence as he talked next morning with his wife.

They occupied rooms at the "Raven"; the Colonel had gone there straight from the court.

"My only idea is to get away," said gentle

Rachel, still tearful and broken down by the reaction from the intense anxiety of the dreadful time they just passed through.

"So we will, dear, for a time," said her husband.

"It must be a long time. I don't seem to feel that I could ever face people, ever live in the county again."

"That will all pass off, my darling. You will forget, as they will, I hope. Besides, if we went away and stayed away, what would be said? That I was hiding my head. No, no. We'll go abroad now, to one of the German baths, or into the Tyrol—somewhere far off—and get back in time for the 1st September."

"You mean to shoot, Ferdinand, this year?"

"Why not? The young birds are very plentiful, I believe, and there are no coverts like those at Straddlethorpe."

"Straddlethorpe? Surely you don't think of living at the Hall, Ferdinand?"

"Naturally I do. Why should I not live

there? Of course, it's yours now; but I hope you don't want to turn me out of doors?"

"Ferdinand, all I have you know——"

"I might say that what's yours is mine, and what's mine is my own; but, my dear child, it is you yourself I value—only you."

St Evelyn was not given to sweet speeches, and at the unwonted tenderness of his words his wife's brimming eyes once more welled over with grateful tears.

"I shall never forget what you have been to me, my good true wife, in all this dreadful business. No woman was ever more staunch, and I shall never forget it, Rachel. I cannot say more."

He gave her one long loving kiss, and then resumed his matter-of-fact talk.

"The question is, how soon can you be ready to start? We might get to London to-night: Sarah and the children could follow us——"

"By all means. I have only to say good-bye to mamma."

"You mean to see Lady Lezaire?"

"Oh! indeed I must. Surely you don't mind?"

"If you wish it, of course go. But I wouldn't if I were you."

"She is my mother, Ferdinand——"

"Upon my soul, I can't believe it. No two beings were ever more unlike."

"My mother means well——"

"Not to me, Rachel. She has hated me always, and now she has tried to ruin me utterly. It's all her doing, this shameful plot. I cannot speak of her, think of her, with any patience. You must not ask me to go and see her, Rachel, for I cannot, upon my soul. I'd rather not see her again."

"Not by-and-by, Ferdinand, when the first bitterness is over?"

"I'd rather not be under the same roof with her. I hope you don't want her to stay on at the Hall."

"I should be sorry—I should not like—to quarrel altogether with my mother," Rachel

began, falteringly, but gained courage as she went on. "I could not send her away."

"She will save you the trouble, perhaps," replied the Colonel, evasively. He had quite made up his mind about Lady Lezaire, and, as the reader knows, had conveyed a message to her through Mr Tinson. But he could not pain his wife by telling her this just now.

"Mamma must feel how cruelly unjust her suspicions have been, and I am sure she will tell me how sorry she is that she misjudged you," Rachel said as she went off, hoping to act as peacemaker.

But there was no disposition to apologise in Lady Lezaire. She met her daughter defiantly, rudely.

"Have you come to give me notice to quit?" she asked abruptly.

"Oh, mother, how can you say or think such a thing?" answered Rachel.

"I say it because I know what I have to expect from Colonel St Evelyn. He has plainly

told me what. But, that apart, I should wish to put as far as possible between us. The world is large enough, I trust, to allow us both room, never to meet again. Of course I must go. But it is hard, desperately hard, to leave my home after all these years. To leave the Hall which was my husband's, and was my darling martyred son's — to go out into the world alone——"

"But why should you leave it, mamma, and why do you say that you are alone? You have me still, and the children, and you will always be welcome here."

"In your husband's house? For it is his really, not yours: all the property which has tempted him to do this wicked murderous——"

"Mother, you shall not accuse him still, and to me. I will not listen. It is too bad, too wicked of you. After the trial too——"

"Do you think I am imposed upon or deceived by that shameful trick? Nobody is. The trial was a disgrace to the law. Gibbings and his master are well matched. But they

will be found out some day, both of them, and will get their deserts."

"It is dreadful to hear you, mother. I could not believe that even your hatred of Ferdinand, your unkindness to me, would carry you so far," said little Rachel in a sad voice, but with much dignity, as she rose from her chair and moved towards the door. "I came, as I felt bound, full of respect and affection, to make peace before we went away."

"You are leaving England?" cried Lady Lezaire, with manifest satisfaction.

"Till September, at any rate."

It was only a short reprieve.

"When I presume you mean to take possession of your place. Very well; I quite understand. Long before September I shall have moved out of the way."

"Oh, mother, do not let us part like this!" said Rachel impulsively, with outstretched hand.

"I do not well see how it could be otherwise," answered her mother coldly, barely noticing the gesture. "Good-bye."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE EXODUS.

Preparations for Lady Lezaire's departure were not delayed. They were hastened by the appearance at the Hall of a Mr Maybrick, one of a firm of lawyers in Market Reepham.

He asked for Lady Lezaire, pleading most urgent business, which rendered a personal interview indispensable.

"I hope, my lady, you will accept my most humble apologies," he began. "I have an unpleasant, most unpleasant, duty to perform, and I feel for your ladyship."

"On whose behalf do you come?" asked Lady Lezaire, interrupting abruptly.

"Colonel and Mrs St Evelyn have intrusted

me with the management of their affairs, and I am desired by him to convey his deep regrets, but to point out to you that, if quite convenient to yourself——"

"Don't beat about the bush, Mr Maybrick. Colonel St Evelyn has sent you to turn me out of Straddlethorpe. Is that it?"

"Well, my lady, yes. You see, the St Evelyn family is increasing, and — and — of course, I understand that it will be a great grief to you to leave your old home."

"Spare me your regrets, sir. When am I to go? At once?"

"Oh, my lady, there need be no such haste. In a month or two."

"I shall leave as soon as I can pack. And now, unless you have anything else to say on business, I will not detain you."

"Pardon me, there is one other point. Colonel St Evelyn wishes me to convey to you his anxiety, his earnest wish—in a word, he is prepared to do what is right. He wishes to make you a handsome allowance——"

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"To me! How dare you repeat such an insolent proposal?"

"It is well meant, I assure you. Colonel St Evelyn is aware that your settlement, secured on the estate, is rather meagre. It was made when the revenues were less. For years now everything has prospered, as you know, and the Straddlethorpe property is worth nearly twice as much as at your marriage."

"If it brought in millions, I would not accept one farthing from Colonel St Evelyn. I have my own portion."

"Yes, yes, my lady. But that, with your settlement, will bring you in, I am told, barely fifteen hundred a-year, and an offer to increase it by a couple of thousand is hardly to be despised."

"Do not speak of it again. Nothing would induce me to take it."

"Well, Lady Lezaire, I should be failing in my duty if I did not urge you to take the money, to which, I may add, you are fully and fairly entitled."

"Be good enough to let the matter drop. I have spoken finally, once and for all," said Lady Lezaire, very stiffly.

"I regret your decision, but must bow to it, and will pass on. I am also desired to place at your entire disposal anything you esteem of especial value—articles of furniture, books, pictures, other than those on a list I will give you; a pair of horses, one or more carriages——"

"Enough, enough!" shouted her ladyship. "Spare yourself and me. I want nothing, absolutely nothing. I will take nothing but what is my own. To prevent dispute, you shall have an inventory."

"It will not be necessary, really."

"But you shall. I insist, for my own satisfaction. Everything shall be set down, jewels, dresses, china, all my private possessions. My maid and Mrs Leleu shall set about it at once."

Mrs Leleu was summoned from the housekeeper's room and received her instructions.

"Can it really be true, my lady," said the

housekeeper, "that you are going—that we are all to be sent away?" She spoke in a sad dejected tone, and sorrow seemed to have subdued the fire of her restless eyes.

"It depends on yourselves, Mrs Leleu, whether you go or stay. Colonel and Mrs St Evelyn will, no doubt, take on any who wish to remain with them."

"Most of us would prefer to accompany your ladyship."

"It is kindly meant, but I shall have only a small establishment in future. I fear I shall not be able to afford a housekeeper. I must be my own. But you shall have an excellent character — the strongest recommendation, in fact."

"Your ladyship is too good," said Mrs Leleu, with a grateful curtsey.

"As for the other servants, they will look to you; but pray refer to me in any particular case."

"One thing I should like to ask, my lady, if you will allow me. It's about Hubert Podi-

fat: what will become of him? The Colonel could never bear him."

"I will take care of Hubert, provide for him, for my dear Carysfort's sake."

"Thank you, my lady, on his behalf. I see so much of him, you will understand that I take an interest in the poor fellow."

"Yes, yes; I understand and appreciate your kindness. By all means tell him what I say."

All this was said in Lady Lezaire's boudoir, a room *en suite* with her bedroom, where she was superintending the operation of cataloguing and classifying. The work occupied the whole morning; in the afternoon it was resumed in the same rooms, and almost completed by evening.

"To-morrow," said Lady Lezaire, "we will take the Spanish chamber. There must be many things there——"

She did not finish the sentence. This Spanish chamber, so called from the old stamped leather that covered its chairs and lined its walls, was full of sad memories. It was the

"best room," the bridal room, occupied always, at least after marriage, by the head of the family, the master and owner of Straddlethorpe.

It had been shut up, disused, for years now, —ever since the death of Sir Percy Lezaire, who had been brought there speechless, partly paralysed, after a terrible fall in the hunting field, and who breathed his last in it, on the great old-fashioned four-poster of carved oak, with its stiff heavy hangings of silk brocade.

Lady Lezaire had hardly entered the room all these years. It was kept constantly closed, and the blinds were generally down. No one visited it but the housemaids periodically, with their tea-leaves and brooms and pails. The furniture was faded, out of date. It might remain so, Lady Lezaire had said; renovation and restoration would keep until the time came for Sir Carysfort to make his choice and bring home a bride to perpetuate an ancient line.

It seemed to poor Lady Lezaire a dreary deserted place that morning, in the bright

strong sunlight when the blinds were drawn up; a sad, silent, tomb-like chamber, peopled even at mid-day with ghostly memories and grisly shapes.

The associations called up were most painful to Lady Lezaire, and she sat for some time with bent head and abstracted gaze, while her attendants went on with what there was to do.

They opened wardrobes, pulled out drawers, tossing things about and rummaging everywhere, till Lady Lezaire roused herself at length to give instructions, and decide what should be left, what taken away.

The Spanish chamber was very large and commodious, of the kind occupied by a married couple in the days before dressing-rooms were deemed indispensable for the master and lord. A bath-room had certainly been added in Sir Percy's time, but he had been in the habit of making as much use of the Spanish chamber as Lady Lezaire. His spacious escritoire still stood in one of its oriel windows; a small book-

case was let into the wall on one side, on the other was a cupboard with locked doors.

Lady Lezaire herself examined the drawers of the writing-table; while she sat at it so engaged, Mrs Leleu, after trying several keys, had of her own accord opened the cupboard. Lady Lezaire was looking at the contents of the centre drawer—some bundles of receipts tied together with faded pale pink tape, a now nearly indistinct photograph of a Scotch mountain view, and several sheets of dust-laden note-paper—when she heard Mrs Leleu say—

"And this, my lady?"

The housekeeper held in her hand an old-fashioned desk or despatch-box of green morocco, with a handle of dark-stained tarnished brass. It bore on the top a plain monogram, the letters "P. L." indistinct, but still legible.

"It was Sir Percy's, I believe. Where did you find it?"

"In this cupboard, my lady, on the top shelf."

"It must have lain there for years. How

strange! I never seem to have missed it; but then that terrible time. Is there anything in it? Have you looked? Is it locked?"

"I'm not sure, my lady," said the housekeeper, placing the desk on the writing-table in front of her mistress.

There was a lock, but a very simple one, which was turned by almost the first key Lady Lezaire tried.

Inside was a packet of papers, tidily arranged, and labelled—

"To be opened after my death," with the date.

"My husband's handwriting!" cried Lady Lezaire. "And the date — two days before his accident! What can this mean?"

With agitated fingers she hastily undid the packet. Several smaller papers fell out on to the table, but she still held a bulky MS., many sheets tied together bearing the same inscription as the outside of the packet—

"To be opened after my death."

Lady Lezaire cast her eyes nervously over

the first few sentences, and almost immediately all the colour left her face.

"This is most extraordinary; I cannot understand," she faltered. Then turning to the housekeeper and maid, and with a great effort, she said, "Leave me, please. I must read these papers alone. Come back when I ring."

Next instant she was devouring the contents of the MS.

CHAPTER XXX.

SIR PERCY SPEAKS.

THIS is what Sir Percy had written :—

"I have placed this letter where it must at once meet the eye of those into whose hands my papers fall.

"It will be read after my death—immediately after, I trust; so that the bitter wrongs I have done the weak and helpless may be speedily righted. I cannot hope for forgiveness, but God is merciful, as man is frail. May all whom I have injured, directly or indirectly, judge me as they shall hereafter be judged.

"The story I have to tell, intimately and seriously affecting those nearest to me, those

to whom I am bound by every sacred and natural tie, is one of shame and sorrow. The shame is mine; the sorrow, the cruel disappointment, the disgrace, the misery, will fall on the innocent and confiding victims I have so deeply and so basely wronged.

"And yet I myself was a victim. I was not wilfully wicked; my fault, my trespass, my crime—I do not spare myself—overtook me unawares. Not till long afterwards, not till years had elapsed, and when it was altogether too late to retrace my steps, to retrieve my errors, did I learn how grievously I had sinned.

"This is my story; it takes me far back, beginning in 185–, when I crossed the Atlantic in search of sport. It was my passion, sport of every kind; but I was perhaps most devoted to fishing. As I had heard almost fabulous accounts of the Nova Scotian lakes and rivers, I went first to Halifax, whence I could move out easily, making excursions for days, weeks even, if I was so inclined. The sport amply

repaid me, and I spent quite six months most pleasantly between Halifax, Windsor, and Miramichi. I fished every mile of the strangely named rivers of these parts—the Nippissiquit, Musqudoboit, and Rastagooch. There were many more, so I was told, at greater distances —some in New Brunswick, some in Newfoundland—and I was determined to try them all.

"Money was no object with me: I have had ample means at my disposal always, and greatly to my own undoing. It has tempted me to self-indulgence, to gratify every fancy, every whim; but there—— Being fond of the sea, and anxious to travel in comfort, I resolved to buy a yacht, or the best imitation of one to be had in these colonial waters. I secured a large Cape Cod fishing-boat of nearly 200 tons, with her tall spars and graceful lines—a clipper in every way, which the skilful shipwrights of Halifax gutted and reconstructed entirely. Her accomodation was ample, if not luxurious; her sailing power first-rate. I found an experienced skipper in the master of a

coaster, and he brought with him an excellent crew.

"I made many cruises in the *Evangeline*, as I christened my yacht, coast-wise, putting into little-known harbours or river-mouths, and lying there while I thrashed all the neighbouring waters and secured generally magnificent sport. After exhausting the New Brunswick rivers and those that fall into the Bay of Fundy, I shaped my course eastward, and passing Halifax entered the Gut of Canso, meaning to traverse the Bay Chaleur and try the fishing on the coast of Labrador.

"One Sunday morning we were abreast of Port Halibut, half-way through the Gut, when the turn of the tide sent the flood streaming through the narrow passage like a mill-race, so that we could make no head against it, and were compelled to anchor just where we lay.

"It was Sunday morning, I say, and I could hear the bells ringing out their summons from the little wooden belfry of the shingle-roofed

church that nestled amidst the fir-woods. The settlement was but a small place: a collection of frame-built shanties belonging to the fisher-folk, whose boats, whalers or "Mudian rigs," were pulled up on the shore. But it was home-like, peaceful, and for once I was drawn to attend to duties too much and too long neglected in those careless, reckless days.

"The impulse was excellent, yet, sinful man that I am! would that I had never entered that simple, unpretending place of worship, with its bare rafters, whitewashed walls, and pinewood pews! I there met my fate; I first came under the black shadow that through a selfish temper and easily roused evil passions, has darkened and must embitter my life even to its closing hours.

"The service was of the simplest; the minister a plain-speaking, patriarchal old man, with flowing white beard; the small congregation devout and humble in aspect, all settlers and seafarers, clad in jerseys or homespun.

"One single exception met my surprised

eyes. In a pew apart—the clergyman's—sat the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. A girl, young, graceful, but reverentially absorbed in her prayers, till, attracted irresistibly, as I thought, by my fixed and ardent gaze, she looked up and saw me for the first time.

"After that it was all over with both of us; I was enslaved, she fascinated. I knew it by her blushes and vain efforts to ignore my eager admiring eyes.

"It was the old story: love at first sight. After church I made her acquaintance formally, through her father the clergyman, who, after the simple fashion of the colony, hospitably welcomed me to Port Halibut. But Priscilla Spary and I seemed to have already known each other for years. Love lives fast, and our intimacy had grown in the passionate glances exchanged long before we learnt each other's names.

"There is no need to linger over this part of my confession: it is not indeed that of which I am most ashamed. There need be no disgrace

in love—honestly given, freely returned. Had I followed the first true promptings of my heart, I should not have to write these words, pen this degrading story. I should have made honourable proposals to the woman of my choice, and married her openly from her father's house, in his own church, blessed by his own hands.

"But I was led astray. I behaved like a blackguard. The pride of descent, of position, the recklessness my wealth and independence gave me, tempted me to sin. I took a base advantage of the trustful, unquestioning affection of an innocent confiding girl, and—woe is me!—dragged her down into the mire.

"Priscilla after much earnest solicitation, consented to elope with me in my yacht. One afternoon, according to prearranged plans, we slipped anchor, and with all sails set and the current with us, were carried out of the Gut on the top of the tide. Our course when once in the open sea lay eastward, westward, to any point of the compass, to any part of the wide

world, just where we pleased; for I was careless of everything, blinded, absorbed by my passion for the foolish woman who had given herself up to me entirely and absolutely.

"Our cruise had lasted a couple of months or more before conscience awoke within me, and I realised how wicked a thing I had done. But now when I saw how bitterly and unceasingly she grieved, I was overwhelmed with contrition and remorse. What atonement was possible should be made at once. The yacht's head was shaped for shore, we landed at the first port, Louisville, and there, before the registrar of the little town, I made Priscilla Spary my wife.

"A generous though tardy acknowledgment this of my duty, my grave responsibility to her. It should have brought me contentment, abiding peace of mind. But strange to say, the marriage did not tend to increase our happiness; on the contrary, the sacred tie, instead of uniting, drove us asunder.

"No doubt I was mainly to blame. I grew

discontented, exaggerated the drawbacks and disadvantages of our union. I seemed to see at last that the wife I had made mine under such peculiar conditions was scarcely a suitable mate; I felt I could not take her back to England, that she was unfit to assume her place in the society to which I belonged, that she would shame, perhaps disgrace me there.

"That these disturbing thoughts were cruel, far-fetched, I am positive now. But yet they grew on me, gained strength, and presently I showed that it was so. My demeanour changed: I was less loving, less considerate to my young wife. Trust a woman for discovering such a change! My wife, my poor Priscilla, changed too. At first she was half frightened; she seemed anxious, nervously eager to regain my good graces. But when she saw that my ill-humour did not disappear, she quickly realised that I had ceased to care for her. The shock must have been severe, but she proudly concealed it. Nothing betrayed her outwardly, beyond a stern impas-

sive coldness, developing soon into sullen silence, varied only by fierce bursts of stormy upbraiding.

"The halcyon days were passed; courtship, honeymoon, happiness—all were gone. It is bitterly painful to me to recall that time—the utter collapse, the complete shipwreck of our love. I am ashamed to remember how cruel I was: how bitterly I spoke to her; how I talked her down when she boldly essayed to reply; how we fought, and squabbled, and fought again. Ah me! would that I could live those days again! But there is still worse to tell. This is a full and unreserved confession, and I must abate nothing, must neither extenuate nor gloze over a single tittle of my crime.

"It was barely six months since we had left Port Halibut, yet I was already heartily sick of my wife, disgusted with the part I had played. We had been cruising in Canadian waters; I had made two long visits to Anticosti, and had fished some of the rivers on the northern shores of the St Lawrence. Autumn was over, winter

close at hand. I had already made up my mind to go back to Halifax, pay off the yacht, and then return to England. Part of my plan was to effect a separation at any price from my wife. I had great hopes that if I secured her a handsome allowance, she would leave me without regret, and gladly live always apart.

"The month was November, the weather bitterly cold; we were still in the narrow seas north of Nova Scotia, and my skipper hinted pretty plainly that he was afraid of ice. We must make at once for the open ocean, or run the risk of being shut in. Our most direct route was by the Bay Chaleur to the Gut of Canso and through it. But how could I show myself near Port Halibut again?

"I was spared the humiliation of running the gauntlet past a place with which I had been so dishonourably associated. Baffling head-winds blowing steadily from the S.W. met us day after day, and although they raised the temperature and diminished our fears of ice, they forbade us to hope to beat up to the mouth of

the Gut. But by making very long tacks to the eastward, we succeeded in weathering Cape Breton, and having now lots of sea-room, were in a fair way to reach the southern coast of Nova Scotia. But while we were still northward of Sidney Point the wind dropped suddenly, and with it the temperature went rapidly down. Intense cold and a smooth sea was certain to facilitate the formation of ice-floes, and it was all-important that we should continue our voyage without a moment's delay. The captain was not less anxious than myself to get ahead. As the day drew on, and the weather promised worse and worse, I ordered the gig to be manned, and started off for Sidney, determined to hire a steam-tug at any cost to take us round the point and on towards Halifax. Priscilla was in the cabin when I left the yacht; I did not ask her to accompany me. That very morning we had had a fiercer quarrel than any before, and I was glad to escape her company. Nor did she bid me good-bye, unless the fixed, almost insolent stare with which she treated

me when I left the cabin could be so interpreted.

"It was a three hours' trip to Sidney, and when once more we rowed alongside, night had fallen; the clear, cold winter's night of these northern latitudes, twenty-five degrees of frost, a glassy sea under a sky gemmed with starry fire, and iridescent with the meteor-like flashes of the aurora. Benumbed with cold I went at once below, eager for food and warmth. My wife was not in the cabin. I looked in the sleeping-berth; not there. I went on deck, meaning to make overtures of peace by gently chiding her for exposing herself to such bitter weather; she was nowhere on deck. Still more surprised, I inquired of the watch where Lady Lezaire was. And then to my astonishment they told me that shortly after I had gone off in the gig she had ordered the dingy to be brought alongside, saying she meant to row about to keep herself warm.

"They were pretty well accustomed to my wife's whims on board the *Evangeline*. They

knew, too, that her will was law. However much we differed, she and I, no one on board was cognisant of the fact; and I to the last claimed the most punctilious deference for Lady Lezaire.

"She had gone off in the dingy more than three hours before; but where? Towards the shore; they had watched her. Her skill in managing the boat, her prowess with the sculls, were well known and much admired by my crew. No one for a moment feared, with such a smooth sea, under such a quiet sky, that she could come to any harm.

"But this prolonged absence seemed more than strange. Surely she ought to have returned to the yacht before dark. She must have got into some trouble, I thought; and without hesitation or discussion I again sent the boat's crew into the gig, and taking my seat in the sternsheets, went off in search of her.

"We rowed to and fro, shoreward and along it, backwards and forwards, for hours. Not a trace

of the dingy was to be seen. It was midnight before I desisted from the search, determined to resume it at dawn; and sore at heart, and with mind full of gravest misgivings, headed once more for the yacht.

"I scarcely slept that night, and long before daylight was again on the move. We rowed now towards the point, and skirted it, keeping close in-shore.

"A speck upon the sea, a boat drifting hither and thither in the tide—this was what I made out at last, half-way round the headland. Frantically I bade the men give way, and almost at racing pace we overhauled the object, to find, horror-stricken, that it was the dingy of the yacht, abandoned in the open sea.

"I jumped hastily on board, fearing almost to find my poor wife lying dead in the bottom, killed by cold and exposure. But no; the dingy was empty, although there were traces still of the unhappy creature who had been its last occupant.

"There lay a jacket, a hat, portions of a woman's dress,—all of them beyond question my wife's.

"What had become of her? Only one solution seemed probable, nay, possible. I noted the ominous absence of the kedge, the little grapnel-like anchor of the dingy, and the painter. She had drowned herself, I felt convinced; fastened herself to a heavy weight to make sinking sure, and so had gone to a miserable death."

CHAPTER XXXI.

SIR PERCY CONTINUES.

"I WAS now perfectly satisfied that my wretched wife had committed suicide, driven to it, I told myself with acute self-reproach, by my cruel and unworthy treatment. How willingly, how eagerly I would have welcomed any evidence to show that I was wrong!

"But there could be no doubt of the fact. She had made away with herself, I felt sure. I went on at once to Sidney in the steam-tug, and there sought assistance; I despatched a whole *posse* of people, lumberers, backwoodsmen, long-shore folk, to make active search in the woods and along the coast, but not a trace

of her was to be found. She was drowned, gone to her last account.

"I lingered still at Sidney for some weeks, nay, months, hoping almost against hope for some more positive news. The discovery of the body would of itself have been a melancholy gratification. But nothing was heard of it; no doubt the weights poor Priscilla had attached to her body prevented its reappearance on the surface of the waters.

"At length, having no longer the slightest doubt that my wife was dead, I journeyed overland, a nearly interminable sleigh-drive, to Halifax, where I took the Cunard mail-steamer and returned to England.

"It was not until the end of the next year that I recovered even partially from the shock I had received. But I found consolation then, and the promise of more substantial happiness, by another marriage. I paid my addresses to Lucy Mirfield, the daughter of a county neighbour, was accepted, and presently married. Our daughter, Rachel, was born next year;

then after a long interval of nearly seven years came a son, and I was rejoiced to think that my little Carysfort would carry on our family line.

"My life was calm, contented, with its sober simple joys. I was happy with Lucy, a tender, loving helpmate; I adored my children; I was respected throughout the county; the times were prosperous, my estates and vested possessions increased. It was about six months after the birth of my son that I received the first terrible shock, and knew instantly that my peace of mind was shattered for ever and ever.

"One morning I found amongst my letters one bearing the Louisville postmark, written in a fair hand with which I was not unfamiliar. With a strange presentiment of coming trouble I hastily opened it and read as follows:—

"'PERCY LEZAIRE,—Only a mother's solicitude for her offspring drives me to break the solemn silence of years. I never intended to reopen the past. You thought I was dead, and so I was—

to you. Nothing, I say, but a stern sense of duty to my child, my boy Hubert, would console me for the bitter humiliation I now feel. I had far rather lie at the bottom of the sea than appeal to your generosity for myself.

"'But it is not as a suppliant that I approach you. I write now to vindicate my rights, and those of your son. Only a few weeks since I learned that you had married again, that your new wife—poor fool! how you have deceived her!—had borne you a son and heir. There was rejoicing at Straddlethorpe: the village bells rang merry peals in welcome to the future owner of those broad lands.

"'Percy Lezaire, it is my child that is the rightful heir—my child born within three months of the time when, wretched beyond endurance, goaded to desperation, I left you. Do your duty by him, or beware. I insist upon his immediate recognition. For myself I care little. At once acknowledge him as your heir, and you shall hear no more of me. Fail in this, and I will come forward, publish-

ing my whole story. I can prove it, every syllable—that I, Priscilla Lezaire, am your lawful wife, and that she who now bears your name, with her base-born brats, usurps the place of me and mine.'

"I need hardly pause to describe the effect that this terrible communication had upon me. I read and re-read it, turning over its contents again and again, seeking for some shadowy hope that it was an impudent and fraudulent attempt to impose. By constant reiteration of this view I came ere long to believe it, and after a week or two I had almost succeeded in dismissing the letter from my thoughts. Surely the wisest course was to treat the whole affair with studied silent contempt.

"The meagre comfort I obtained from this decision was rudely assailed before three months had passed. A second letter came from Priscilla, more peremptory, more menacing in its tone.

"Still I could not bring myself to act; and a

third letter found me still wavering, almost at my wits' end.

"This third letter might well distress me. It was not from Nova Scotia, but from London. Priscilla had come in person with her child, a boy now of eleven years, to prosecute her claims.

"It was impossible to delay longer. Some steps must be taken forthwith to satisfy Priscilla, to silence her, if possible to buy her off.

"I went alone to London that very day, to the address Priscilla gave me, a lodging-house in a street off the Strand. I saw her there, the true Lady Lezaire, wan and worn, but still handsome, and bearing herself proudly, despite her evident poverty and the meanness of her surroundings.

"The meeting was indescribably painful to both of us. The recollection of it alone is bitter; I will not linger over its details. For a long time Priscilla was defiant, implacable, but I won upon her at last entirely through the boy. By a distinct and solemn promise

to watch over and provide for him, I persuaded her to waive her rightful pretensions and withdraw to Nova Scotia again. I agreed to make over to her at once a substantial sum in hard cash to secure her against want, and to take charge of the boy myself. I swore by all I held most sacred to do my duty by him, and this letter, acutely painful as it is to me, is a most unreserved fulfilment, however tardy, of my oath.

"It was at this interview that I learnt how Priscilla had fared from the moment she had left the yacht. Her voyage in the dingy had been straight shoreward; she had landed under the headland where we had found the boat, had left portions of her clothing on board, and had removed the kedge and painter to bear out the idea of suicide, just as we had supposed.

"From the coast she had made her way through the woods to Louisville, where, her scanty resources failing her, she found refuge at length in the hospital, and here her child was born.

"The birth was registered, by a strange coincidence, at the very registry office where we had been married.

"As soon as Priscilla regained strength she had gone into service, and electing to remain at Louisville rather than be an object of scorn at Port Halibut, she presently found a comfortable place as housekeeper to a gentleman in the town. There she was living when the chance perusal of an English paper put her in possession of the facts concerning me, to which I have already referred.

"Priscilla promised me to leave England again without an instant's delay, and in order to expedite her departure, I went straight from the Strand to Lincoln's Inn Fields, where I made a garbled and incomplete confession to Mr Harvey, the senior partner of Harvey & Tinson, our family solicitors. I told him that years previously I had formed a connection in Nova Scotia, one of which I had no reason to be proud, but that I did not desire to evade the responsibilities I had incurred.

"A child had been born, and I was anxious to do my duty by it. Of course I made not the slightest allusion to the legal ties by which I was really bound. To have confessed my marriage to Priscilla would have fallen like a thunderbolt on the dear ones at Straddlethorpe, to spare whom, if I could, I was resolutely but culpably determined.

"Mr Harvey heard my story with grim disapproval, but he could not withhold the advice and assistance I sought. He agreed to take charge of the boy, temporarily, until I could provide for him.

"On leaving the lawyers I cashed a cheque for £1500 at my bankers, taking the bulk of it in one hundred pound notes, which I handed over to Priscilla, my rightful wife, as the price of her perpetual silence. In exchange, but very reluctantly, and torn with passionate sorrow, she surrendered her son, my rightful heir. I never saw or heard of her again.

"The boy Hubert, now twelve years old, remained in Mr Harvey's hands for some months,

but the lawyer frequently urged me to relieve him of his charge. I wished to have the lad properly educated, and hoped Mr Harvey would manage the whole business for me. But it was one that seemed extremely distasteful to the lawyer, and I found myself compelled ere long to take it into my own hands.

"About this time a man who had been on a hunting expedition with me in the Far West, a practised backwoodsman, wrote begging to enter my service in England if I could get him a place. He was a splendid shot, and I made him under-keeper.

"It was on condition that he should adopt young Hubert, and give him his name. To remove him from Mr Harvey's charge to his new home at the under-keeper's lodge, was a matter easily effected. As I write these lines the boy is there still: the boy who is really and rightfully the heir to the baronetcy and all the Straddlethorpe estates."

The confession, so far as the facts conveyed, ended here. But Sir Percy once more took

himself to task: with poignant upbraiding and self-reproach implored the pardon of those he had wronged.

One or two important documents were added to the confession in support of it. There were certified extracts from the registrar's book: one of Sir Percy's marriage with Priscilla Spary, witnessed by Hamish Groot, master mariner, and Peter Spofforth, both of the yacht *Evangeline;* the other certified the birth of the boy, Hubert Algernon Lezaire, at Louisville, on the 9th January 185–.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IS HE THE HEIR?

Of the mingled feelings that oppressed Lady Lezaire after the perusal of this strange confession, indignation was scarcely the strongest. She would be more angry with her husband by-and-by, when the full measure of her disgrace and degradation were realised—when it came more forcibly home to her that she had never been married—that she was a mother but no wife—that her children were illegitimate, and that she had no right to the title of Lady Lezaire. She could not be expected to forgive Sir Percy Lezaire for exposing her, even unwittingly, to such reproaches as these.

But her first emotion now was a sort of sardonic satisfaction.

"He will lose it all—that wretch! In the bitterness of his disappointment I could almost rejoice at this dreadful blow."

This brought her to consider what action she ought to take, if any, and when.

"They burn my hands, these papers. I feel I have no right to hold them a moment longer than I can help. They are legal documents, and must be given up to the lawyers. Mr Tinson, I suppose, has left Market Reepham. He must come back at once."

Lady Lezaire gathered up everything, and returning to her own sitting-room, carefully locked up the despatch-box with its contents. Then a telegram was sent off to Essex Street, Strand, requiring Mr Tinson's immediate presence at the Hall.

The lawyer came down early next day, and was immediately taken to see Lady Lezaire.

"It is the strangest story I have met with in my whole professional experience," he confessed

frankly, when he had read all the papers. "Strange, and to me almost incredible."

"But there are the facts, Mr Tinson. You cannot go against the written evidence."

"I don't know what to say. You are quite satisfied, quite positive this is Sir Percy's handwriting? You have seen more of it than I have."

"Oh yes; I have no reason to doubt it. It is weak, variable, but I feel sure it is his."

"What beats me is the concealment of the confession till the present moment. Let me see, when did he die?"

"On December the 11th, 1871."

"Eight years ago. And these papers, of the most vital importance, have lain hidden all this time. Extraordinary!"

"Not when you consider where they were."

"But how can they have escaped the executors? My partner, old Mr Harvey, was here for a week or more going through the deceased's papers, just after Sir Percy died."

"He could not have visited the Spanish

chamber. So far as I can remember, the room was shut up immediately after the funeral. No one entered it then, or has since, except the maids."

"Well, I am answered, but not entirely satisfied, Lady Lezaire. You see such tremendous issues hang on this confession."

"As regards the property?"

"That in the first place. Then as regards yourself——"

"Oh, never mind me. Let justice be done; let the rightful heir succeed, and without delay. He has too long been kept out of his own."

"Yes, yes; but we must proceed regularly, Lady Lezaire. It will be necessary first to make every step sure. No notice of ejectment —and that is what will have to be served on Mrs St Evelyn if the case is to go on——"

"Why, of course it is to go on. The St Evelyns must be dispossessed; he must be forced to disgorge the plunder he has taken such dreadful means to secure."

"Forgive me, Lady Lezaire. Colonel St Eve-

lyn has been acquitted by a jury of his fellows. You must not make such insinuations."

"The point is whether you will act in this matter, or shall I call in some other lawyer?"

"On behalf of the claimant, this Hubert? You would make his case your own?"

"I do not hesitate—if he has the best right to be master here."

"Of course, I owe no allegiance to Colonel St Evelyn. On the contrary, he has taken the affairs of the Straddlethorpe estates altogether out of our hands. But it is a serious thing to declare war, to commence a suit of ejectment, in fact. We must see our way first quite clearly; we cannot take up such a case, you understand, merely on 'spec.' It would not be reputable —we have our professional character to think of, Lady Lezaire—nor safe."

"You might be out of pocket, you mean, if the case went against you?"

"Frankly, yes. We should lose heavily, and not only in money."

"So you refuse to take it up?"

"Softly, softly, my dear lady. I do not say that. But I must make some inquiries, some preliminary investigation. I must verify some of these facts——"

"For instance? Is not the evidence of my husband's confession enough?"

"No; these marriage and birth certificates must be authenticated; and the claimant, Sir Hubert, as he ought to be called if his case is clear, must be identified."

"By whom? How?"

"Our Mr Harvey is old, and has retired from the business; but he is perfectly clear-headed still. He will assuredly remember the boy Sir Percy intrusted to him, and can say whether he is one and the same with this Hubert Podifat, as he was called, who has lived here in Straddlethorpe ever since. By the way, what is he like, this Hubert? Is he still here?"

"Have you never seen him?"

"Once or twice casually. But I know nothing of him—of his disposition, character, quali-

ties, I mean. Would he do credit——in plain English, is he at all equal to the great change he may expect in his fortunes?"

Lady Lezaire shook her head doubtfully.

"Perhaps we had better have him up here," she said. "You can speak to him and judge for yourself."

"I don't think it would be quite wise. It might get about; be misunderstood. Or it might raise false hopes in the young man. I would rather come upon him unawares. Where is he most likely to be found?"

"In the stable-yard, I expect. That is his home by preference."

"I'll go there. If I don't see him, I may come across some of the men, who may tell me something about him."

"They won't tell you much good, I'm afraid. He has never been very popular with our people. My poor dear boy made such a favourite of him, I think they resented it."

Mr Tinson, who knew his way about the Hall, presently left her ladyship and went

towards the stables. He found old Peters in the harness-room alone.

"Morning, sir. Young Podifat? No, sir, I ain't seen him, and I don't want to," growled the old coachman.

"What's the harm in the young man? You don't seem to like him."

"No, sir, I don't; and never have since the black mare was foundered all through his mad driving home from Thorpe Bosworth Fair."

"I thought he was fond of horses."

"Fond of gruelling and ill-using them, and galloping their tails off. Not but what he's got a neat seat and rare hands on a horse. Only he's not to be trusted with the ribbons; a wild reckless chap when he drives."

"Is he steady—otherwise?"

"Steady!" repeated Peters, with a sardonic whistle—"as steady as skim milk on a shovel. I wouldn't trust him—not to feed frogs with a spoon. What do you say, Mr Staines? Would you call young Podifat steady?"

Staines was the head-keeper, who came in at

this moment—a short, thick-set man, with thick bushy whiskers, and the calm, cold blue eye of the true sportsman.

"It depends. Steady enough after fur or feather; but when it comes to books—well, a fly-book's the kind he likes to read."

"Can he tie a fly?"

"With any one, or kill a fish. A dead shot, too. It's well for him he's had the run of the shooting and the river, or he'd a been nabbed for poaching long ago."

"A keen sportsman, eh?"

"But not a fair one, sir. He's only keen to kill. If I'd let him he'd have netted the weir, or trapped the pheasants, or shot a hare in its form. Anything to kill—he's that cruel. You see it with dogs. He can break them—no one better—but it's with cruelty. He's cruel hard."

Thorndike, the farm bailiff, whom Mr Tinson found in his little room near the servants' offices, was still more condemnatory.

"I could never see any good in him, sir—never. An idle, useless, ill-mannered cub—

that's what I call him. Never would do a hand's turn of work, except perhaps at hay-making time, and then he was always romping with any of the saucy queans that would let him."

"Was he a favourite with them?"

"As much as such a black-muzzled, cross-grained young chap could be; and when he let the beer-jar alone."

"Aha! Drinks, eh?"

"He's not quite a sot yet, Mr Tinson, that's all I can say. But I never knew him refuse a horn of cider or a mug of ale, and I have seen him muzzy and dazed times out of number."

"He's not much likely to do much good for himself, then."

"Not he; and no credit to any one else."

"What's he fit for, Mr Thorndike? Anything? Her ladyship would like to do something for him — he can't stay here with the Colonel, you know."

"If he did, he'd soon make acquaintance with the Colonel's hunting-crop, I expect, and the

best thing for him. The Colonel did send him to Coppocks, the land-surveyors in Market Reepham. But that's too regular work for him. I should say, send him out to the colonies, the backwoods where old Podifat came from, or somewhere where he could lead a wild harum-scarum life, shoot game without a licence, and cook it in the open air. He'll never do much good in these parts, or anywhere else at home."

Not a very encouraging report of the rightful heir to Straddlethorpe; Mr Tinson felt that. And if he had any doubts whether these evil reports were over-coloured by malice or personal dislike, more direct and unmistakable evidence was now forthcoming.

As he still talked with the bailiff, an angry scolding voice—scolding in fierce contemptuous tones—was heard in the passage.

"Where have you been? It's an hour past dinner-time. What kept you? Can't you speak?"

"It's Mrs Leleu," said Thorndike, grinning.

"She's rating him soundly; that's her way, but it'll do him no good."

"Podifat?"

Thorndike nodded, and held up his hand.

"Can't you answer?" went on Mrs Leleu, and the vigour of the question was obviously increased by a rude shake. "Where have you been all the morning?"

"In—in—down Somerleaze Spinney," was the thick, indistinct, stammering reply.

"It's a lie; I know it by your voice. You've been boozing, muddling away your little wits, you filthy, drunken sot. Where? Come, tell me; I will know."

"At the 'Cow and Pail.'"

"Where did you get the money? I've told them not to serve you. It's that brazen slut, Bet Bickerdike—but I'll get her turned away from the bar; you'll not get fuddled there again."

"I like Betty; Betty likes me," hiccupped Hubert.

"Go in with you, you low, disreputable

young blackguard! Go in, and sleep off your drink. I'll tell you what I think of you when you're sober; not now," cried Mrs Leleu, and her voice was heard no more.

"She doesn't spare him," remarked Mr Tinson, with a half laugh. But he was thinking seriously on what he had heard, wondering how the housekeeper would bear herself should this *mauvais sujet* prove to be the real master of the Hall.

"I believe in her heart she's fond of him," said Thorndike. "You see he's always lived with her, and it's natural she should wish to keep him straight."

"Has he any regard for her?" Mr Tinson asked, speculating a little on their future relations should Hubert come in for the title and estates.

"Hardly. Anyway he don't show it, and by-and-by he'll abuse her, call her every name, to any one who'll listen. There ain't no gratitude in him, or proper feeling. To my thinking he's a rank bad lot."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

EJECTMENT SERVED.

Colonel St Evelyn had travelled with his family into the very heart of Europe. It had been his wife's earnest wish, and he himself was nothing loath, to put long leagues between them and the painful episodes through which they had just passed. He was willing enough to avoid English people, to escape English gossip, and to see none of the papers which still commented on and freely criticised "his case."

He had found the peaceful seclusion he sought at a little lake-side town in the Salzkammergut, at pretty, primitive Hallstadt, under the wing of the snowy Dachstein, and

on the brink of the green waters of the deep mountain-tarn.

They were perfectly happy here, revelling in their retirement and in the simple pleasures the place afforded. St Evelyn found trout innumerable in the rushing torrents that fed the lake; they made long fishing expeditions, husband and wife and little ones, all about: where the distances were great, Rachel and the children were carried in the local sedan-chairs; but the Colonel, still strong and sturdy, tramped everywhere, delighting in the vigorous exercise. Of an evening they went out on the tranquil lake, the whole party easily accommodated in the flat-bottomed boat rowed by stalwart peasant-girls; the Colonel lying back lazily watching his cigar-ash, while Rachel read to him or they listened to the children's prattle.

It was an Arcadian existence, calm, happy, and uneventful: one of those lulls in the storms and troubles of our earthly journey which all of us but the most miserable experience at

times;—a period of absolute repose which is too often the precursor of sorrow and misfortune, just as the whirlwind is preceded by a deathlike stillness in the physical world.

"Too bright to last," Rachel had said that morning, with a not uncommon presentiment of evil near at hand.

It came that very day, in the shape of a letter from Mr Tinson—a business letter, brief and to the point, with a summons to surrender so summary and unconditional that St Evelyn felt the case against him must be strong.

"As the husband and nearest representative of Mrs Rachel St Evelyn," wrote Mr Tinson, "I beg to give you notice of ejectment from the Straddlethorpe estates. The existence of a son of Sir Percy Lezaire by an earlier marriage has been in our opinion satisfactorily and conclusively proved, and the rightful heir has placed the matter in our hands. If you are disposed to contest the claim, be so good as to notify us of the names of the solicitors

acting on your and your wife's behalf, who will accept service, as we shall carry the matter at once before the court.—Your obedient servant, HILARY TINSON."

"What is it, Ferdinand dear?" Mrs St Evelyn asked. "You seem put out. Won't you tell me? Do not keep anything from me now, after all we have gone through."

"I have nothing to conceal, only I don't understand quite. The thing's so sudden, so incomprehensible, so strange. But you should know; you may help me, dear. Did you ever hear that your father had been married twice?"

"What! before he married mamma? Oh no, never! It cannot be possible. Who says so?"

"It is positively asserted here," said the Colonel, holding out the letter. "More, that there was a child by this first marriage."

"Who is that from?"

"Mr Tinson."

"Surely mamma does not know of this?"

"There is no mention of Lady Lezaire, but I seem to see her hand in it. A fresh attempt to ruin us. Really, Rachel, your mother——"

"And what became of this child?" asked Mrs St Evelyn, avoiding all reference to Lady Lezaire.

"Alive and kicking, if this letter is to be believed. Means mischief too, both he and his backers."

"But I cannot conceive how it could have happened. Where has he been all this time, and why kept in the background?"

"If it's what I suspect, we all know him well enough. There was a mystery about him, perhaps, but he was always to the fore. A fine creature to be a baronet!"

"You know him, then. Of whom are you speaking?"

"Why, of Hubert Podifat. He must be the new pretender."

"Hubert my father's son! How extraordi-

nary! It is the first time I ever heard of such a thing."

"Naturally they kept it from you, my dear. But I knew, and that is one reason why I always wished to get him away from the Hall. It did not seem nice, his being brought up and so intimate with poor Carysfort."

"Hubert Podifat! What does it all mean? Will he take everything? must we give way? Oh, Ferdinand, think of our children!"

"Their interests shall not be lightly surrendered, my darling—never fear. Brag is a good dog, but Holdfast is a better. We've got the estates, and we'll stick to them. The idea of giving way before this nameless, base-born scapegrace!"

"God will defend the right, my dear husband," said Rachel.

"And He helps those who help themselves. I mean to fight this," said St Evelyn resolutely, as he rose from his chair and walked towards the hotel.

"Where are you going, dear?"

"To tell the maids to pack. We must catch the afternoon express for Munich, and hurry home as fast as we can."

So satisfied was St Evelyn in his own mind of the dishonesty of this new claim, that he went at once to Mr Amos Davis, whose practice was mainly devoted to the exposure of fraud, and put the whole affair into his hands.

"They mean business," said Mr Davis, quietly, "and they must have something to go upon. Harvey & Tinson, you may be sure, would take up nothing on 'spec.'"

"But what foundation can there be?"

"That's what they will have to tell us. The law will require them to show something more than strong presumption. They must have facts, or a good imitation of them, or the case cannot proceed."

"You mean to call upon them, then, to show their hand?"

"Quite so. We shall write on your behalf, utterly scouting and repudiating the claim, and demanding its immediate withdrawal, or

a full statement of the evidence on which they presume to base it."

"Suppose they refuse?"

"They won't refuse us: no one does. It is pretty generally acknowledged, I think, that people who consult us suspect foul play. I have never met this Tinson yet in business, and I'm not sorry to have a tussle with him."

The St Evelyns remained in London, so as to be within easy reach of the lawyers, and on the third morning a telegram summoned the Colonel to Mr Amos Davis's chambers.

The astute lawyer looked grave.

"We have Harvey & Tinson's answer this morning, full and explicit enough. I may tell you it has taken me an hour or more to digest."

"What do you think of it? Have they a leg to stand on?"

"They have got a very strong case, Colonel St Evelyn, if these facts can be substantiated," and the lawyer put his finger on a bulky par-

cel of documents. "If there is any truth in these statements, and the documentary evidence will bear examination, I should be disposed to recommend——"

"Surrender? Nothing would persuade me to give up."

"Compromise is what I should suggest. Do not contest the claim. Let this Hubert have the title, and keep all you can in the shape of cash."

"Compromise? Never!"

"I should be failing in my duty if I recommended anything else: always supposing, you understand, that the case will bear the test of inquiry. If it does, and you have resisted, you will find yourselves—Mrs St Evelyn and the children, I mean—left out in the cold."

The Colonel expostulated, and protested with much vehemence and force of language that nothing on earth should induce him to yield to this preposterous attempt to ruin him. But when the long flow of fierce words was exhausted, and Mr Davis set forth the facts as

alleged by the opposite side, he rather changed his tone.

"You mean to tell me that the marriage with the present Lady Lezaire was void and illegal?"

"Undoubtedly so, if"—with strong emphasis on the if—"these papers are not forgeries."

"That must be tested forthwith."

"It is what I was going to propose," said Mr Davis. "We must send a trustworthy agent to Nova Scotia without delay, who will make it his business to verify the entries in the Louisville register, and get what information he can about this Priscilla Spary, the baronet's first wife."

"He will find out, I feel confident, that it is all a trumped-up story."

"Let us hope so," said Mr Davis, pursing up his lips. "But I confess at the first blush of the thing it bears the impress of probability, if not of veracity. The story is circumstantial and straightforward; I cannot find a flaw in it, not a link is wanting. Our man may detect something which will help us, but upon my

soul I would strongly advise a compromise—if you can get it. Remember the alternative."

"If we lose the case my wife loses Straddlethorpe."

"More than that. The establishment of the first marriage would invalidate your wife's settlements, and would deprive her absolutely of all she inherited under her father's will."

"She would, in fact, be illegitimate?"

"That is exactly the state of the case. The present Lady Lezaire would, in fact, have no right to the name, nor her children to inherit from Sir Percy."

"It would go hard with us indeed if this pretension was accepted in law."

"I don't see how it is to be opposed, unless something turns up in Nova Scotia."

"You will send a man at once, armed with the necessary instructions?"

"I have already selected him. There is only one formality wanting. You will excuse me, Colonel, but business is business, and in matters of this kind it is our invariable rule to ask for

something in hand. We must have an advance to cover preliminary expenses."

"With all my heart. We are playing a big game, and I'm not afraid of the stakes. What shall it be? Two or three hundred?"

"Your cheque for £250 will do at first. But I must tell you fairly we shall soon want more."

"Pray, draw upon me for whatever is necessary," said the Colonel off-hand, but with by no means a light heart. Money was plentiful with him just then, but it was Straddlethorpe money, every penny of which he might yet be called upon to account for. Of himself he had but little to meet the demands of a great and expensive lawsuit.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE SUIT PROGRESSES.

Mr Tinson had not been idle. From the day he had seen Lady Lezaire and read Sir Percy's confession, he had devoted himself to getting up the case. Certain preliminary facts must be established before he could move an inch, and his first energies were concentrated on these.

Various certificates, as I have said, were attached to the documents found in Sir Percy's despatch-box. These were verified copies of the Louisville register, drawn up in the usual way on printed forms belonging to the office and signed by the registrar.

Mr Tinson had little doubt that they were

authentic, but he deemed it advisable to despatch a clerk to Nova Scotia to compare them with the originals. The points in the case were such as were likely to strike every lawyer alike, and this comparison had commended itself also to Mr Davis. Another point was the need for identifying the first wife, and Mr Tinson's clerk, as well as Mr Davis's agent, had been instructed to make inquiries about Priscilla Spary.

These were matters which Mr Tinson, fully occupied with the management of a large business, was obliged to delegate to a subordinate. But there was one more which he could attend to himself. Little less important than this documentary evidence was the identification of the new claimant. Unless it could be clearly proved that Hubert Podifat was the boy whom Sir Percy had acknowledged as his son, the whole case fell to the ground.

There was only one person living who could swear to Hubert, and this was the aged Mr Harvey, who was head of the firm in Sir Percy's time. The old gentleman lived at

Brighton, enjoying the late autumn of a long life, a last flicker of vitality, a sort of St Martin's summer, at that bright and joyous retreat. He was very infirm, and lived the ascetic regular life of a confirmed invalid. Two hours in a bath-chair about mid-day, two hours in a victoria up and down the King's Road and the Madeira Drive in the afternoon, a rigorously careful diet, and the absence of all emotions, was the unvarying rule of his life. But he was still clear-headed, and he took an old man's interest in any business matters in which he had been himself associated. Mr Tinson was well aware of this, and gladly availed himself of his senior's lights and advice in all that dealt with the past.

With regard to Hubert, he was anxious, if possible, to obtain some recognition from Mr Harvey by surprise. Of course it was easy enough to let the old man into the whole secret, and ask him point-blank whether he remembered the boy and under what circumstances. If he could bring the young fellow

into Mr Harvey's presence unexpectedly, and win from him any spontaneous acknowledgment of his identity, it would immensely strengthen the case; still greater value would attach to it if this recognition took place in the presence of others.

This idea gained so much favour with Mr Tinson, that he set himself to execute it carefully and formally. An application was made to a judge in chambers to appoint commissioners to take evidence in a certain matter, and two learned but not overworked barristers were instructed accordingly. They were to go to Brighton, call on Mr Harvey, and put certain questions to him in the case of Lezaire *v.* St Evelyn.

The next step was to bring Hubert Podifat upon the scene. This required some circumspection, but was not really difficult for a young man fond of pleasure.

It was an understood thing that some employment was to be found for Hubert, and that he was to leave the Hall before the

return of the St Evelyns. Mr Tinson, who was in regular correspondence with Lady Lezaire, mentioned to her his wish to bring young Podifat and Mr Harvey together, but reminded her that it must take place at Brighton, as Mr Harvey was too infirm to travel. It would be necessary, therefore, to get the young man there casually, as it seemed; and the best way to accomplish this, wrote Mr Tinson, would be to send him down to see how he would like to be bound to a veterinary surgeon at Brighton.

Hubert Podifat had often heard of Brighton, and jumped at the idea of visiting it.

Mr Tinson met him, and went through the form of introducing him to the great Mr Vasey, who followed the double profession of riding-master and "vet." Hubert's future employment was to follow whichever of these two lines he preferred.

"You can think it over, Podifat," said Mr Tinson, "and come round to-morrow morning and give me the answer. I am staying at

Royal Crescent. Come punctually at eleven, as I shall be going out. Here is one of my cards: send it up when you arrive."

Next morning Mr Harvey was in his arm-chair at the bay-window overlooking the sea, and talking past business with Mr Tinson.

"I forgot to tell you," said the latter, "I have a consultation this morning. I met Loader and Perrymore yesterday in the King's Road, and they promised to look in. Do you mind my seeing them here?"

"Not at all," said the cheery old gentleman, "if you don't mind talking before me. I love to hear what's going on."

The two counsel were introduced in due form, and while they were still interchanging civilities with the veteran solicitor, Mr Harvey's man came up with a card to Mr Tinson.

"To see you, sir."

"I beg your pardon, Mr Harvey," said Tinson, turning apologetically, "but a young fellow has called with some important papers. May he bring them up?"

"By all means. Pray make yourself at home here."

Next minute Hubert Podifat entered. Mr Tinson rose and took him to the second window, where he held him in a strong light facing Mr Harvey for two or three minutes or more.

"That will do," he said, as he showed him to the door, where he added in a low voice, "sit down in the dining-room, will you? I may want you again."

"Here, here, Tinson!" cried Mr Harvey, excitedly. "Who was that young man?"

The bait had evidently been taken.

"I have seen him before, I am sure," went on Mr Harvey.

"Does he remind you of any one?" and Mr Tinson, as he spoke, looked significantly at the two lawyers.

"It is the boy himself; I know him perfectly. His name is——" then he checked himself suddenly—"but I had forgotten; I promised to say nothing about it. Only it is so long ago, and

the principal party has been dead and gone these years."

"Sir Percy Lezaire, in fact."

Mr Harvey nodded. "As you know, I need not mind speaking. That young fellow's name is, or used to be, Hubert Podifat—of that I am satisfied. I never forget a face, old as I am."

Mr Tinson burst out laughing, and honestly confessed the whole stratagem, explaining in detail the exact position of affairs. Mr Harvey expressed himself perfectly willing to assist the law; he was duly sworn, and the evidence taken down by the two commissioners, Hubert Podifat being recalled to the drawing-room to be positively identified as the lad whom he had seen with Sir Percy Lezaire. What Sir Percy had said of the lad's parentage and near relationship to himself was also sworn to by old Mr Harvey, but not in Hubert's presence. So far as the identification of the claimant and the tracing of his movements from boyhood to the present time, the case was perfectly clear.

Thus the first important step was secured.

Satisfactory news soon followed from beyond the Atlantic: the certificates had been found to tally exactly with the entries in the registers; a visit to Canso Straits established the existence of the Sparys, and the story of Priscilla's elopement was still remembered, although no relations survived.

This was the report Mr Tinson received. Something very similar reached Mr Davis, and through him St Evelyn.

Yet the Colonel was by no means disposed to throw up the sponge. He still talked big.

"They must turn us out neck and crop," he said. "I will go for nothing less than an order of Court."

They were back at Straddlethorpe now, and their reappearance at such a time, when the ownership was still in doubt, and Mrs St Evelyn's rights strongly contested, told in his disfavour. It would have been better taste to have stayed away. Lady Lezaire had left; the claimant, Hubert Podifat, was content to remain in the background. Why did St Evelyn

parade himself so publicly at the place he had gained by such questionable means? This was what many people said, especially the Wyndham-Parkers, and the strong faction that was hostile as ever.

But the Colonel was not to be put down by clamour, to be driven out by any unofficial irresponsible opinions. He meant to hold his own stoutly to the last, yielding his ground upon compulsion only inch by inch, and resisting to the uttermost this new and equally wicked attempt to ruin him.

"It shall go into Court," he said, "into every Court. If one is against us I'll try the one above, and so on to the very highest."

Mr Davis warned him.

"Think of the enormous expenses."

"They will come out of the estate."

"If you win, yes. But if you lose?"

"What else can I do? Am I not bound to defend my wife's interests, my children's inheritance? Of course it's a serious matter. There's the wickedness of it. The whole thing is a

monstrous fraud, a direct attempt at robbery. Either way it must cost us thousands."

"That's why I have always recommended compromise."

"Would you compromise with a thief who had you by the throat?"

"Well, I don't know; but if my life was in danger I think I should give in."

"I have been brought up to fight," said the Colonel, "against any odds, and that's what I mean to do now."

CHAPTER XXXV.

HUBERT SHOWS FIGHT.

It had been Mr Tinson's wish to keep Hubert Podifat as long as possible in the dark with regard to his future prospects. There was manifest injustice in encouraging hopes that might prove delusive. The young man was not of a sort to bear good or evil fortune philosophically. It was wisest to postpone all news of the one until it became reasonably probable—to minimise the other by making no premature announcement.

But when the case was ripe for trial, and the first application to eject was to be made in open court, secrecy was no longer possible: the whole story would become public property

through the law reports. Mr Tinson felt that his client had now a right to know what was being done in his behalf.

All this time Hubert had remained at Brighton. The kind of life he led there was far from displeasing to him. He liked his work at Mr Vasey's, so far as it was possible for him to like any work. It was not hard. The study of horse-flesh was of the practical kind, and he was already well grounded in the subject. Veterinary science, however, occupied but little of Hubert's time. He was such an excellent horseman that he could make himself very useful to Mr Vasey, who did more as a riding-master than as a vet. Hubert was soon utilised in the school, and presently, when the Brighton season was at its height, he was intrusted with a "ride"—a troop of joyous young ladies studying equitation, whom he escorted along the King's Road and sometimes as far as the Downs.

"Hubert Podifat?" answered the foreman of the yard when Mr Tinson inquired for him.

"He's out with a class—I expect for the last time."

"Why, how? or why do you expect that?" asked the lawyer eagerly, wondering how the news had travelled. "Has he said he was going to leave?"

"No fear. It's we are going to leave him. The governor's downright mad with him, and swears he'll give him the sack."

"What has he done?"

"Why, what d'ye think, sir? This very morning he bucketed our brown mare along the Dyke Road forty miles an hour, riding a match with one of the pupils. The girl let out at dinner-time, and her father, old Fieldus the chemist, has been round to complain."

"Is the horse injured? We may make that up to you——"

"'Tain't only that: that's the smallest part of it. They say—only I can't quite believe it—that the devil's imp has been making sheep's eyes at the girl; and what's more, that the girl don't half mind."

"Well, they're both young. It wasn't right, perhaps, but——"

"Right! Him to buckle up to Rebecca Fieldus! An only child. The old man's worth £40,000, they say, and it'll all come to her. D'ye suppose old Fieldus 'd suffer it, that he'd stand to a match between his daughter and one of our lads? 'Tain't natural. And look at the harm it'll do our business. We want our lads to keep themselves to themselves, to know their station and keep it, or who'd trust their girls to our rides?"

"And you think Mr Vasey will want to send Podifat away?"

"I'm sure of it. He's no great catch. A loose fish, I fancy; too fond of the west pier at nights, and in and out of the 'Magpie' bar all day. But there's the governor, and I think I hear the horses in the yard."

Mr Vasey, a thick-set, red-faced, middle-aged man, with the air of a gentleman's coachman out of livery, had gone out to meet the returning ride. He stood in the centre of the yard

with his legs wide apart, and fingering a stout hunting-crop in rather a menacing fashion.

"Here, you, Podifat!" he cried out, and the lad having dismounted, approached rather defiantly, with less, as Mr Tinson thought, of his customary slouch. "What's this about the brown mare? I'll teach you, you young cub——"

"Don't touch me," answered Hubert angrily, springing lightly back a step or two. "No one shall lay a hand on me. I'll do for you, or any one who dares strike me."

"Why, Podifat!" interposed Mr Tinson, "keep your temper. This won't do."

"No; it won't do. I'm not the sort to be knocked about by them."

"You rascal, do you dare mutinise in my yard? You've bred mischief ever since you entered it, and now you've foundered one of my best horses and insulted one of my best customers," went on Mr Vasey, very loud and blustering. "Get out, before I break this crop on your evil black-muzzled mug!"

"Don't fret yourself," said Hubert, now mocking and impudent. "I'll go of my own accord. I've had enough of your dirty yard and filthy jobs. I'm a gentleman, as he knows," pointing to Mr Tinson, "far too good for your blackguard business. Stand back! yah!"

Next minute he was in the street, closely followed by Mr Tinson, who was not a little surprised and put out at what had occurred.

"You had better come as far as my hotel," said the lawyer. "I have a good deal to say to you, particularly after what I have just seen and heard."

"I'm not going back there, not for nobody," Hubert said sulkily, interpreting Mr Tinson's words his own way.

"That's as may be," replied Mr Tinson, stiffly. "I don't quite see what's to be done with you. If you won't work——"

"Why should I work?"

"What are you to live on if you don't?"

"On what's coming to me. I know."

This confirmed Mr Tinson's first suspicions

that Hubert somehow had gained an inkling of what might be in store for him.

"What do you know?"

"Never mind. Only I'm fly. I'm not to be humbugged. I know my rights."

"You know a great deal more than any one else does, then. You have no rights as yet——"

It was no good beating about the bush. They were now seated in Mr Tinson's room, Hubert, at his own request, before a large tankard of "dog's nose," and the time for some sort of explanation had arrived.

"No rights: only expectations which may never be realised. Remember, there's many a slip."

"When will it be settled?"

"Not for months—a year. And then, perhaps, against you after all."

"I don't believe it. I'm bound to 'cop.' The chances are all on our side."

"I cannot imagine how you've heard that. Who's put such notions into your head? It's

very wrong to mislead you: nothing is certain. On the contrary——"

Hubert looked dogged and unconvinced.

"Well, we won't waste time in arguing over probabilities. The chief point is, what are you to do until we can see our way more clearly? I had hoped you would have stayed on here with Mr Vasey, but I suppose that's out of the question now."

Hubert made no reply, but his set teeth and sullen look showed plainly what he thought.

"Where are you to go? How are we to——" keep you out of mischief? Mr Tinson would have added, but forbore.

"I don't dislike this place. It's only Vasey. He's a mean hound."

"You ought really to be preparing yourself——" Mr Tinson was musing as to the young man's possible future, but checked himself. "I mean that at your age a fellow should be trying to improve himself. Now tell me, what sort of education have you had?"

The question seemed to puzzle Hubert.

"Where were you at school?" asked Mr Tinson, simplifying the question.

"Market Reepham: the Free School, for a short spell."

"How far did you go? Latin, Greek, the three R's?"

Hubert looked hopeless.

"Can you read?"

"A bit."

"And write?"

"On a slate."

"Anything else?"

"I was put into ciphering; but I played the truant and master whopped me, and then I ran away."

This was the presumptive heir to a baronetcy and twenty thousand a-year.

"It will never do. Whatever happens, whether you win the suit or you have to make your own living, you cannot be left in such hopeless ignorance. I must find some one who takes pupils of your sort, backward and neglected youths. I hope you'll agree to that,

and make the most of your opportunities. It will be for your own good."

"Shall I have to leave Brighton? I don't mind a little schooling if I may stay here."

His affection for Brighton sounded suspicious. What was underneath? Mr Tinson drew his own conclusions. This country-bred youth, with a natural bias towards vicious self-indulgence, had found some potent charms in the lower life of the gay seaside city, and was loath to surrender its pleasures.

Yet as well there as elsewhere. He was a scapegrace, a ne'er-do-well, as every one said, and, Mr Tinson now knew for himself, one who would be certain to give trouble, to kick over the traces wherever he spent the next few months. Discipline would be wasted on him, but it might be possible to remove him some distance from temptation—and this the astute lawyer effected by placing him with a tutor at Patcham, a village two or three miles from the town.

Hubert fell in with this arrangement readily

enough. But it was not, as Mr Tinson thought, the awakening of a better spirit, a commendable desire to make up for lost time, that induced Hubert at five-and-twenty to go back to school.

The fact was, Mr Fieldus, the father of the lovely Rebecca, resided in a snug modern villa, surrounded by glass-houses and green lawns, at Preston Park, a short mile from Hubert's new home.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A BOLT FROM BRIGHTON.

The result of the preliminary hearings had been decidedly unfavourable to the St Evelyns, but the Colonel obstinately hoped on. The first actual shock came with the intimation that the Court intended to appoint a receiver for the Straddlethorpe property, and at last his confidence began to give way. This was a step seldom adopted in an ejectment case except when it was considered that the revenues were in the wrong hands.

The news fell rather heavily, too, upon Lady Lezaire. Although at the outset the prospect of dispossessing St Evelyn had given her extreme pleasure, her satisfaction became more

and more alloyed as she realised all that the transfer of the property meant to her. If only it could be shown that the first wife had died before Sir Percy's second marriage! This would make all the difference to the survivor. She would still be entitled to call herself Lady Lezaire.

But this was a point on which Sir Percy's confession left little doubt. The date of Priscilla's death was distinctly stated, but there was no official proof of it. Satisfactory evidence on this head was earnestly sought in the inquiry made by Mr Tinson's agent, but no proof of it could be found.

Lady Lezaire was thus indirectly a party to the suit, and very closely concerned in it. She continually questioned Mr Tinson as to what might befall her.

"I suppose it is certain that the woman is dead?" she asked doubtfully, the day that she heard of the appointment of the receiver.

"We have no certificate, and until death is proved the law presumes the person is still

alive. Now the effect of showing that Priscilla Lady Lezaire is alive now, would be to establish the fact that she was alive when you married Sir Percy. Hence that marriage was illegal."

"And I have no right to call myself Lady Lezaire?"

"Precisely, except by courtesy. But under the circumstances who would be so brutal as to deny you the title?"

Lady Lezaire shook her head sadly.

"It is very painful to me—it is another cross to bear; it is all very, very hard."

"But at any rate your position from a monetary point of view will not be affected. We have taken the best advice, and counsel are all unanimous that your settlements will hold. Sir Percy made them in good faith, out of personalty which he was free to dispose of as he pleased. They took the nature of a deed of gift."

"And my jointure—is that safe too?"

"Well, that is more doubtful. You see it

was secured on the entailed property, and can only hold if the new heir accepts the lien. He should do so, by every principle of justice, and he shall, if I have any influence over him."

"I should be sorry to be beholden to him, but I really look upon this as my right."

"You are fairly entitled to do so. That is the view Sir Hubert will take, if he has any proper feeling," said Mr Tinson, with a confidence he scarcely felt. What he had seen of the new baronet did not encourage high hopes of the generosity of his principles, or the nice feeling he was likely to show.

"And Rachel's portion—will she keep that?"

"The cases are not dissimilar. Hers depends, like yours, on the production of proof of Priscilla's death. Failing that, she must be accounted illegitimate, and could inherit only the moneys specially bequeathed to her. She could not touch a penny of the rent-charge left her for life upon the entailed property. But she is far worse off than you, because she has to defend the suit."

"That will affect them, then?" asked Lady Lezaire, with a satisfaction she did not care to conceal.

"Undoubtedly, unless costs are given by the judge against the estate. If the St Evelyns lose, it is pretty probable that they will have to stand the shot."

"What are the costs likely to amount to?"

"There is no saying. £20,000 won't pay them. And then there are back rents, the sums wrongfully received up to the present date—quite half a year's income. It will take all they have, and something more."

"They will be ruined!" cried Lady Lezaire, almost gleefully.

"It will go very hard with them. The Colonel has nothing, I believe."

"Not a sixpence—never had."

"What will become of them? Upon my soul, it seems hard."

"Mr Tinson, how can you say such a thing! and after his—his—— You know. I can't bear to speak of it. Surely no punishment that

overtakes him in this world can be too severe. Let him starve; he will deserve it."

"But Mrs St Evelyn, Lady Lezaire, and the innocent children—shall they suffer for their father's sin?"

"She made her bed, let her lie on it. I shall do nothing for them. They need not expect it."

A talk having much the same tenor took place between St Evelyn and his legal advisers. As the day of the great trial approached, the St Evelyns' chances seemed to dwindle away. The case grew stronger and stronger against them. An independent inquiry instituted by Mr Davis only satisfied him of the overwhelming strength of the claimant's case. Once more Mr Davis counselled compromise, but it was now too late. Nothing but unconditional surrender would be accepted by the other side.

"All or nothing, that's our answer," said Mr Tinson triumphantly, when overtures were made.

The case was down for hearing in the early spring, little more than a twelvemonth from poor Carysfort's death. It was likely to be soon decided, for the evidence was short and to the point.

"It all lies in a nutshell," said Mr Tinson. "I really think we are bound to win. I wish I was as sure of keeping the new baronet straight until his succession, when I shall wash my hands of him."

The reports received from Patcham were by no means encouraging. Hubert's tutor could do nothing with him.

"He won't learn," wrote this gentleman, a Mr Partridge, who was a kind of army coach, and had one or two other pupils, "and leads the other lads astray. It is more obstinacy and wrong-headedness than stupidity. The young man may not be quick-witted, but he is no fool. Only, he loathes books and everything connected with them. I may possibly enable him to sign his own name, but not certainly the same way twice. If I might venture so far as

to suggest it, I think it would be wise to limit him as regards funds."

Mr Tinson, feeling that some day Hubert might have the command of a princely income, did not feel justified in altogether withholding supplies, and he had been making the young man an allowance of a couple of pounds a-week.

"The money all goes the same way—with low company, in the gratification of low tastes. It is with the greatest difficulty that I keep him to regular hours. He is for ever wandering into Brighton or elsewhere, returning sometimes quite late at night. On one occasion a mob of disreputable friends brought him home flushed with drink, and in altogether a most discreditable condition.

"Several times I have thought that in justice to my other pupils I ought to beg of you to remove him from my house."

But Mr Partridge was a poor man, to whom a pupil more or less mattered greatly, and he continued to tolerate Hubert's presence till a

more serious scandal compelled him to telegraph to Mr Tinson—

"Pray come down. Great trouble. Podifat in custody."

The moment was ill chosen for any escapade. The case of Lezaire *v.* St Evelyn was to begin that week, and the appearance of the claimant in court was indispensable.

"What has he been doing?" asked Mr Tinson sharply of his tutor. "I am afraid you have allowed him too much licence."

"He has been a cause of infinite trouble to us," pleaded Mr Partridge. "I am quite sorry we kept him."

"So am I. He was too much for you. But now, what's the matter now? where is he? In custody? Where? On what charge?"

"At Newhaven. The charge is abduction. He has run off with the only daughter of a highly respected——"

"Chemist, named Fieldus. Isn't that it?"

It was the sad fact. Hubert's numerous absences from Patcham were thus explained.

He had been carrying on an insidious intrigue with the gentle but too trusting Rebecca. What wiles he used were never fully laid bare; but it was ascertained that for conquest he had not depended on his dark face alone. He had posed as the exiled nobleman who must shortly recover his own. His mysterious hints of what was coming to him—a title and great fortune, in both of which she should share—sufficed to win the silly girl's favour. Miss Fieldus had but lately left a boarding-school, and was still wrapt in romantic dreams. Hubert was the prince promised her by sycophantic schoolfellows, who toadied and worshipped the young heiress.

Oswego Villa, where Mr Fieldus resided, stood detached; in front, a long lawn reached the highroad—behind, another, with thick shrubbery, ran parallel with the railway embankment. Hubert came along the line to the trysting-place, slid down the embankment, and made his way to his lady-love through a thick-set hedge. Their meetings were conducted with great secrecy. Old Fieldus was away at his business

all day, and the servants were suborned to silence by the artful Rebecca.

A crisis came when the chemist ran up against Hubert near the house, recognised him, and angrily warned him that if he showed himself there again he should be handed over to the stablemen and thrashed within an inch of his life.

The course of true love was thus rudely ruffled. Hubert told Rebecca that he was watched and did not dare see her again.

Why would she not go off with him?

Next day, with fifty pounds in his pocket which he had raised from a Brighton Jew on his expectations, and a bill for three times the amount, Hubert was whirling along the Newhaven road, Rebecca at his side, in a mail phaeton and pair. They meant to catch the Dieppe steamer and go on at once to Paris. Rebecca had travelled this way before, with her father.

But the runaways had been betrayed by the livery-stable keeper, who had suspected Hubert

from the first and consulted Mr Vasey. Old Fieldus followed, furious, to Newhaven, having first put the police on the alert, and the lovers were detained. The father recovered his daughter, and Hubert was sent to the lock-up, with three serious charges against him, all started by the implacable Mr Fieldus: first, the abduction of a minor; next, obtaining money (from the Jew) under false pretences; and last, the attempted theft of a mail phaeton and pair.

This was the mess Mr Tinson had to clear up. And he did it, but only by much astute argument, and a lavish expenditure of cash. The money-lender kindly accepted cent per cent for his advance; the job-master could not substantiate theft when his property was restored to him with a handsome douceur; but old Fieldus was more obdurate.

"He shall go to jail. I want to see him on the treadmill, or picking oakum. I'd like to see him hanged."

"Of course he richly deserves punishment," Mr Tinson admitted. "But just think, the

innocent will suffer with the guilty. If you proceed against him, your daughter's name must be dragged into court. Now, wouldn't it be better to avoid the—ahem!—scandal, eh?"

Mr Fieldus was very loath to let go his revenge, yet he saw the full force of what Mr Tinson said.

"Poor child! she'll never hold her head up again, I'm afraid. He hadn't ought to be let off, the double-dyed young scoundrel; but for her sake—I suppose I must give way."

"He ought to make her amends, Mr Fieldus. He has promised to marry her, you know, and he shall do so, if you wish and approve."

"Never! What! give my Rebecca to that scamp? Let all my money go to a sot and a scapegrace who'd squander it and ill-use her? No, no. He's no mate for my girl. How she will weather this, God knows; but to marry that blackguard would be too heavy a penalty to pay."

"I don't defend him: I should be sorry indeed to recommend him. He is by no means a perfect character—that I readily admit. But

under the circumstances—you may have heard, perhaps?—he would be no unequal match."

Mr Fieldus was better read in the pharmacopœia and preparation of drugs than in the proceedings of the law courts, and he had evidently heard nothing of the great case pending.

"I know of no circumstances—none at present, I mean"—he said, "that could reconcile me to accept him as a son-in-law,—a low-born scamp, a mere adventurer——"

"There you are mistaken, Mr Fieldus. I may tell you——"

Mr Tinson paused. Why should he tell Mr Fieldus of Hubert's chances? They were good enough, but they might go against him after all. If Mr Fieldus would not take him, there was an end of the matter. It was enough to get the young man out of the scrape, and this Mr Tinson secured.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"LE ROI EST MORT."

Vive le roi!

Le roi est mort. Vive le roi!

The great Lezaire case was ended, and the new baronet, Sir Hubert Lezaire, reigned supreme.

It had never been in much doubt, said those learned in the law. The only hitch, the disappearance of Priscilla Lady Lezaire, *née* Spary, and the absence of proof of her death, did not affect the heirship. It only left Rachel's right to her inheritance in doubt. This point was reserved, but eventually settled by a compromise.

Mrs St Evelyn might enjoy all she inherited

undisturbed, provided her attorneys gave an undertaking not to appeal. The Colonel was persuaded, with some difficulty, to consent to this. His wife kept her portion, or the remnant that survived the lawyers' claims—a mere pittance. The St Evelyns were practically beggared.

Let us leave them for the present to recommence life in poverty and discomfort, and follow the fortunes of the new owner of Straddlethorpe Hall.

What will he do? How will he behave? These were the questions asked on all sides and by all manner of people in Thorpeshire.

Nowhere was the new owner of Straddlethorpe canvassed more eagerly and with more misgiving than at the Hall itself. Servants and employees of all grades, almost without exception, were very anxious as to the future.

They knew Sir Hubert so well, all of them; and he knew them. What kind of master was this jumped-up youngster likely to make?—this fortunate youth who till yesterday had been

one of themselves, lower than many, superior to none; browbeaten, knocked about, abused, often cuffed, and very generally despised?

Many said, especially among the upper servants, that they'd better give notice and clear out.

"I shan't want to be kicked out," said honest Tom Staines, the head-keeper. "We've had too many cross words, him and I, for us to forgather and be good friends. I know he hates me, and I've never had no respect for him. I'd rather go under-keeper for a bit than stay here and knuckle under to him."

"That's my view," observed Mr Thorndike, the bailiff. "I've been on the estate, man and boy, these five-and-forty years, and know every stick, every stone. I shall be heart-sore at leaving the land, but I must go. I could have stomached the Colonel. For all he's so arbitrary, he's a gentleman, and acted fair. But I couldn't give this chap willing honest service, knowing what he's been, and all I've said of him, and all I feel."

"I suppose Sir Hubert's money'll be as good as another man's," said leery old Peters, who scented good times coming for those who knew how to turn them to account.

"Do you mean to stay, Mr Peters?"

"It'll all depend on how he shapes and who he puts over us. If you ask me, I say I'd far rather stay. It's ill changing roofs at my time of life, and to my thinking Sir Hubert's better than that murdering Colonel. What have we got to do with what he was? It's what he is and means to be. I'm ready to serve him faithfully if he'll let me, and 'll treat me fair. He's had a slice of luck—well, I don't grudge it him."

"But you'd like to stand in and share? That's about the size of it," cried Tom Staines. "A stable full of nags, the buying and swopping all in your own hands, to say nothing of the corn and the hay."

"I likes my regulars, Mr Staines, and so do you. Do you never sell pheasants' eggs or take tips for placing the guns? But if you wish to

say that I'm not straight and above-board, why, you'll have to stand to it. I'm no worse than my neighbours."

"I never defrauded my master of a mag," retorted Staines, angrily. "If you weren't an older man——"

"There, there," interposed Mr Thorndike. "No quarrelling among old friends, and before ladies too. Here comes Mrs Leleu."

The housekeeper, in her quiet black dress, with her dark inscrutable face, was seen crossing the yard to the harness-room, where the foregoing conversation had taken place.

"Morning, ma'am," said Staines. "Any news? We're talking of what's likely to happen. Shall you stay on?"

"What do you intend to do, Mr Staines?" replied Mrs Leleu, evading the question adroitly, but it was plain she resented it and did not choose to answer.

"We mean to go, Mr Thorndike and I, before we're turned out. Now Mr Peters here——"

"No one need be turned out, I'm sure, unless he wishes it," replied Mrs Leleu, with an air of patronage. She was evidently more behind the scenes than her fellow-servants. "Sir Hubert has no present desire to make any change in the establishment."

"Have you heard that for certain?" asked Mr Thorndike.

"Yes, this morning, from Mr Tinson. That was what brought me here. Peters, you are to meet the 3.5 express. Sir Hubert will arrive this afternoon."

"What carriage?"

"Mr Tinson did not say. You will know best."

It was now full summer-tide, and the old coachman, mindful of the importance of the occasion, took over the open barouche, a state vehicle of ancient but imposing appearance, with a great yellow body swinging between high curved springs. Both Peters and the footman beside him were in their best liveries, and even the groom with the luggage-cart

wore the bottle-green coat with orange cuffs of the retainers of the Lezaires.

Sir Hubert came tumbling down the side-steps of the station as fast as he could run, and made straight for the carriage.

"Holloa! what's this?" he cried, evidently disgusted and disappointed. "I expected the mail phaeton."

"Nothing special was ordered, Sir Hubert," said Peters, promptly and most deferentially, as he made the usual salute.

"It's that ass Tinson. And I was dying to finger the ribbons. Here, Tinson, I say, they've brought the barouche, and I particularly wanted to drive myself. Why didn't you see to it?"

"Why didn't you see to it yourself?" replied the lawyer with quick resentment. "You're your own master, and can give your own orders now."

"But you haven't let me. You are always interfering. I'll be blowed if I——"

"Be quiet, can't you!" whispered the lawyer,

nearly exasperated. "Before your new servants too! Jump in; we can settle all this at Straddlethorpe before I take my leave."

The *rôle* of bear-leader was clearly displeasing to Mr Tinson, and he did not mean to play it long.

"Jump in? Not I! I shall get on the box. I mean to try the paces of these bays. Peters never would let me drive them in old times, but he can't help himself now."

"And what's to become of Peters himself, and the footman?"

"They shall go inside."

"With me? Thank you."

"No; you can get up on the box. I'll take care of you."

This was how Sir Hubert Lezaire started to take possession of his ancestral home. There was a general but suppressed laughter at the little station as the barouche disappeared, driven at a breakneck pace by its owner, while his men sat up as solemn and unconcerned as

they could manage upon the seats of honour inside.

The journey to Straddlethorpe was a short five miles, but fate ruled that many persons should witness this madcap escapade. The galloping horses, flogged to their utmost speed, got out of hand and first narrowly overturned a pony-carriage, then cannoned against a market cart, and meeting last of all the humble waggonette of a country parson, so terrified its driver that he turned sharp off the road and was upset into a ditch.

The manner of Sir Hubert's entry into Straddlethorpe was the common talk of the whole county before the week was out.

"Not so bad," cried the new baronet, consulting his watch, a brand-new gold repeater, as the steaming horses were reined in with difficulty at the hall door. "Twenty-nine minutes the five miles. What's amiss, you old fool?"

This was to Peters, who had alighted at once,

and was already examining his cattle, the most cherished pair of horses in his stable.

"Too fast, too fast, Sir Hubert. They're not in Derby condition."

"Well, they ought to be, if they're to drag me behind 'em. But two won't do, I want a team. You must look out for 'em: four of a colour, a level lot that'll do credit to a coach by Marlitt & Tunks."

He rattled on nineteen to the dozen, to Mr Tinson's manifest annoyance, while Peters stood listening respectfully and the footman held the hall door open wide.

There was some one waiting within who was moved seemingly to great wrath by what she heard and saw.

"Scatterbrain! Addle-pate! Senseless idiot! to make such a beginning."

It was Mrs Leleu: her black eyes flashing indignation, and her pale dark face fierce and forbidding.

But when the baronet passed under his own rooftree, she had schooled herself to look pleas-

ant, and greeted him quite smiling, with the smirking self-satisfaction of an old and privileged attendant.

"My humble duty to you, Sir Hubert Lezaire; a warm welcome and hearty good wishes! May you live long to enjoy your good fortune, now you've come to your own!"

"What! Mother Leleu herself! I had clean forgotten. How goes it? I'm glad to see you so blooming. But I say, none of your jawbations now. Things is altered. But come along, let's refresh."

"Tea is laid in the china drawing-room," said Mrs Leleu, rather primly.

"Tea! Hog's wash! ditch-water! No catlap for me. Send in the decanters. I'm for port wine and potash. What'll you try, Tinson?"

And Sir Hubert passed on, still holding the carriage-whip, and without removing his hat, to the drawing-room called the "china-room," from the numerous cabinets it contained, all crammed with costly Sèvres, Dresden, and old

blue. There he sprawled full length upon a settee covered with fine satin brocade, drank three glasses of port running, and lit an enormous cigar.

"Why do you let him go on like that?" hissed Mrs Leleu in Mr Tinson's ear. "It's bestial. He'll be ruined, lost, within the year."

"I'm not his keeper or his bear-leader, the Lord be praised!" responded the lawyer, quite piously. "If you're so concerned for his welfare, you'd better take him in hand. I've other and more pressing occupations. I said I'd start him fair, so I came down, but I don't care how soon I go back again. In spite of the good business he brings, I think I've had nearly enough of Sir Hubert Lezaire."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE STRADDLETHORPE STAKES.

THERE was a magistrates' meeting a few days later in Market Reepham, and much county business to transact; so the Thorpeshire Club was very full about lunch-time. It was a sociable little place, where every one knew every one else, and at the long table where all sat together the talk was general and well sustained.

It was all on one topic: the new owner of Straddlethorpe, his strange advent, and the way he would "shape" as a neighbour and personage in the shire.

"It was tremendous the way he drove home," said Lord Prudhames. "He was like Mazeppa

urging on his wild career. Gibson, our parson, met him and fairly turned tail."

"Fancy driving one's own barouche and the coachman inside!" said another.

"I don't so much quarrel about that," said sensible old Etherly of Etherly. "It's a distinction only. Any man might drive a coach and put his own people inside. Besides, I daresay he's fond of driving, and no doubt hasn't had much of it."

"Put a beggar on horse-flesh and he'll drive to the devil," added Mr Newall, who went in for epigram.

"That's where he'll go, hands down, in less than no time, I'm afraid. Make ducks and drakes of everything."

"What a Nemesis for Sir Percy! A fine property nursed for years just for this spendthrift to squander it."

"He'll never do, I'm afraid. There's no quality about him. He may have the blood, but he's missed the breeding, and it's too late to get that now."

"He ought never to have been lifted out of the mud. It's monstrous hard on the St Evelyns," said Mr Etherly, who was still stanch to his old friend.

"I really cannot see that." The speaker was General Wyndham-Parker. "St Evelyn married for money——"

"Come, come. And at any rate Rachel did not."

"For money which slipped through his fingers. He was after Straddlethorpe, and made no bones about the means of acquiring it."

"Oh, I say! When thirteen jurymen and a judge tried and acquitted him, would you call him guilty still?"

"I shall always have my own opinions, and I'm delighted the property's come to the right man. I don't belief he's half a bad chap, this Hubert Lezaire."

"Will he do his duty by the county? Will he keep up his coverts, breed foxes, and subscribe to the hunt?"

"He has sent a first cheque of a hundred

towards the new kennels," cried the General. "He told me so himself yesterday."

"Oh, you have seen him, then. Where?"

"At his own place. I called at Straddlethorpe."

He might have added, but did not, that Sir Hubert had returned the visit already—in fact the same day.

"I suppose we must all call," said Lord Prudhames, to turn off the smile which lighted his as well as most faces at the table.

Mrs Wyndham-Parker had still three marriageable daughters, and Straddlethorpe was now in the market.

"Well, I went because I had to go," said the General, seemingly unconscious. "I had to speak about that slip of gorse that borders my spinney."

"And how did you find him, General?"

"Very shy."

"That was probably sherry."

"I certainly saw no signs of that. He was diffident, as might be expected, but by no means

gauche. I feel confident that, with kindly encouragement, he would soon improve."

"If he could only marry, well and soon," said Mr Etherly, maliciously.

"It would be the best thing for him," replied the General, stoutly refusing to understand the allusion.

"Undoubtedly," all agreed. "If any sensible girl could be found to manage his establishment for him—it'll soon want it, I expect—and take him himself in hand."

"Ay, ay! but where is she to be found?" asked Mr Etherly, abstractedly. "I don't envy any girl the job. To my thinking, she'd have a rough time. Where is she to be found, eh?"

It was an open question which no one felt constrained to answer, although one person present was ready to do so. General and Mrs Wyndham-Parker thought they knew of the very wife to suit Sir Hubert Lezaire.

They had six daughters in all. One only had married as yet: Mrs Richards, the wife of the

old aide-de-camp who had been a candidate for the county jail. Then came three, familiarly known as 'Ica, 'Ina, and 'Etta, the pet abbreviations of the long-winded names, Frederica, Georgiana, and Henrietta. Two more, 'Ita and 'Otta, were still in the schoolroom.

Although making a fair show at Hazelgrove—a house long empty and rented low—money was not too plentiful with the Wyndham-Parkers, and the prudent parents were most anxious to get their daughters comfortably settled.

Yet the three now on hand hung fire, and within a year or two there would be five. Ita and Otta were fast growing into womanhood.

Etta, it was true, had made a conquest at Plymouth when staying with her married sister, whose husband was now an army paymaster. But it was no great catch—a captain in a marching regiment with no expectations—and two old soldiers like General and Mrs Wyndham-Parker knew to a penny the exact value of such a military marriage.

Etta was attractive, more so than her elder

sisters: there were people, indeed, who called her remarkably pretty. Her father and mother both thought she might do better for herself than with this Captain Sutton. Still they did not quite refuse their consent. After all, a bird in the hand——

Not a little of the General's objection to Etta's engagement with Captain Sutton was due to its irregularity. As an officer of the old school, he was a great stickler for seniority. Age before honesty: the first-born had the first claims. Etta might marry Captain Sutton or almost any one, when she pleased, provided Ica and Ina were disposed of and out of the way.

Hence in the campaign against Straddlethorpe—and the plan of operations had been fully discussed and settled directly Sir Hubert had gained his suit—it was resolved to push Ica, the eldest, well to the front.

Frederica Wyndham-Parker thoroughly understood what was expected of her. She was ready to go forward to the attack like a true veteran,

grateful for the chances of distinction accorded her.

She was with her father on his first visit to Straddlethorpe. They rode over. Ica looked well on horseback: a habit suited her thin figure, and her plain swarthy face looked less uninteresting under the tall black hat.

Sir Hubert came out to the doorstep, and insisted rather boisterously—the General had described him as shy!—on their entering the house.

"I want to talk business for just two minutes, Lezaire," began the General.

"You must come in, sir—come in and take something. Too early? Stuff! it's past twelve. And the young lady: she must want refreshment after her ride."

"No, no," protested the General, as he explained. "It's about that bit of gorse. Now your new man Woodley — an honest chap enough, I daresay—and I don't agree."

Sir Hubert did not listen. He was already helping Miss Wyndham-Parker to dismount,

clumsily enough, but with great goodwill. Somehow an arm slipped round the slender waist, and Ica felt a very distinct squeeze of her hand. The young baronet knew only one way of making himself agreeable to the fair sex.

The rare blushes were still mantling on Ica's sallow cheeks when Sir Hubert, finding his hospitable offers refused, insisted upon showing them over the Hall. The invitation seemed to confirm a vague hope that she had made an impression, and she forgave him the forwardness that was a silent but expressive tribute to her charms.

They visited all the principal rooms, and duly admired all: the china drawing-room, my lady's boudoir, a charming chamber looking out on a little rose-garden of its own, specially appropriated to the mistress of Straddlethorpe, and long occupied by the last Lady Lezaire.

As Ica looked round she saw herself with prophetic eye already installed, and her hopes ran higher when Sir Hubert stepped out into the garden and gathered her a choice bouquet.

But the business talk had rather suffered; the General had not again referred to what seemed a mere subterfuge for calling. It was the young baronet who returned to the subject.

"What about the gorse, General? Shall I send for Woodley?"

"Why not have a horse round and ride there? You could come on and lunch at Hazelgrove."

"Right you are. I'm your man. It won't take me five minutes to order a horse."

Sir Hubert was ready himself to jump into the saddle. His favourite costume was horsey; he lived in breeches and gaiters, and looked at his best like a horse-dealer's tout or under stud-groom.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

SIR HUBERT'S FRIENDS.

When the horses were brought round to the door, Sir Hubert helped Miss Wyndham-Parker to remount in approved fashion, lifting her after he had taken her tiny foot in his hand, then placing it in the stirrup and carefully arranging the folds of the habit.

"You're like a feather," he cried. "I should think you could ride six stone four. And a first-rate jockey too," he added admiringly, as he saw her sitting up straight and self-possessed.

"Ica can ride a bit," said her father. "All my girls can. I taught them myself."

The little General was very proud of his own horsemanship.

"Shall we take a spin round the park, sir? We can get out at the far end; that is, if you are not afraid, miss, of a bit of jumping."

Ica for answer gave her horse his head, and the three cantered gaily on across the level turf, affrighting the few timid deer that still made the park their home, and pointing with increasing pace for the low fence, beyond which was a grassy lane-like road that led to the home farm.

"Bravo!" cried Sir Hubert, as Ica sailed first over the fence, he following close in her wake. "You took that like a bird. Come on! let's have a racket across the fields."

"Hold hard!" shouted the General. "You'll ruin your hay crop, and there's young corn beyond."

"Bother the crops!" answered Sir Hubert, as he reluctantly reined in. "Never mind, Miss Ica, we'll have our gallop out yet. Wait till the cub-hunting comes. I should like to pilot you across country; you're one of the right sort, and you shall ride my chestnut mare."

Ica was radiant when she reached Hazelgrove; her eyes sparkled with satisfaction. It was with quite an air of ownership that she presented Sir Hubert to her mother.

"Sir Hubert Lezaire, mamma; he has come to lunch. Papa brought him with us. And we have had such a delightful ride!"

"It is very good of you, Sir Hubert, to join our family party," said Mrs Wyndham-Parker, a large fair woman with the remains of great good looks, but rather anxious pale eyes and worn washed-out complexion, that spoke of family cares. Poor mother! she had a large brood—disappointing daughters that would not go off, an expensive household, and not too ample means. Life had not been easy with Mrs Parker; hers had been a wandering nomad existence, from garrison to garrison, all over the world, always campaigning and struggling, till they had settled down at Hazelgrove, where other troubles, these disappointing daughters, constantly vexed and preoccupied her.

"Well, girls," said the General, bustling in.

"How are you, Maria? Hope you have a good lunch for us. But I told Sir Hubert he must take what he could find."

The luncheon-party had been planned, like everything else, and was something more than the ordinary square, substantial, mid-day meal that generally made a pretentious late dinner unnecessary at Hazelgrove.

The guest's place had also been carefully settled beforehand. He sat between Mrs Wyndham-Parker and the daughter they intended for him, Ica, who, still flushed and excited with her ride, retailed its chief incidents with much animation.

"Where's Etta?" asked the General, crossly. His military training had schooled him to the most exact punctuality, and he expected it from every one in the house. "She must have heard the bell. Besides, it's long past two."

"Shall I go and call her, father?" asked one of the younger children.

"Certainly not. If she likes to lose her lunch, that's her affair."

But at that moment the door opened, and Miss Etta, slow, self-possessed, and unconcerned, walked in.

"Late for parade, miss," began the General, sharply. "You know the rule: dry bread and cheese——" He stopped abruptly, checked by a scowl from his better half. These details of a strict domestic discipline were hardly calculated to impress their guest.

"I could not come sooner. I was finishing a letter to Sam," said Miss Etta, coolly.

Now Sam was the Captain Sutton to whom she was supposed to have engaged herself altogether without her parent's consent, and this reckless remark was like a challenge flung down for her father's acceptance. Under other circumstances a sharp passage of arms would undoubtedly have ensued.

"Is that another of your girls?" quickly asked Sir Hubert, who had been staring hard at Etta ever since she entered the room.

"Yes," replied Mrs Parker, indifferently.

"My third daughter, Etta. You were saying, Ica——"

"Sir Hubert has offered to give me a mount for the cub-hunting—his chestnut mare."

"I seldom let my daughters follow the hounds, Sir Hubert. And she has her own saddle-horse, a very good one, I think."

"Eh? Oh yes, I beg your pardon, a regular stunner," answered Sir Hubert absently, and thinking only of the beautiful girl at the other end of the table who still absorbed all his attention.

Etta Parker took after her mother, and was the only one of the six daughters who favoured her. She was tall and statuesque, with a dazzlingly fair complexion and abundant auburn hair. A low forehead, dark-blue eyes, strictly regular features, a small but firm mouth, were not the least of her charms.

For the remainder of the lunch Sir Hubert continued silent; he spoke very little, and only in answer to questions addressed directly to him. Mrs Wyndham-Parker found him

very heavy on her hands, whilst to poor Ica's blandishments he was altogether callous and indifferent. Eyes and ears were only for Etta. He was always looking at her, now furtively, now openly, always listening for the sound of her voice. Strange to say, and quite contrary to his usual custom, he drank very little wine at lunch. But when the ladies rose and left the room, he gulped down a great bumper of sherry, as though to drown his despair.

The General pretended not to see the perfectly obvious impression that Etta had made. Sir Hubert had taken a fancy to the wrong one, and it was repugnant to the General's peculiar notions to acknowledge or approve the choice.

But before the day was out it became plain that he must part with his pet prejudices or lose an eligible son-in-law. Sir Hubert's attentions to the most attractive daughter of the house—Etta was quite the flower of the flock—were marked and unmistakable.

It was a delightful summer's day, just warm

enough to make the open air pleasanter than the house; and when the General offered a cigar on the lawn, they found the whole family picturesquely grouped on garden-chairs and bright-coloured rugs under the shade of a great horse-chestnut tree. Of course the lawn-tennis net was stretched, and the courts marked out invitingly.

"You are not going to run away yet, I hope, Sir Hubert?" said Mrs Wyndham-Parker, hospitably. "Won't you join the girls in a game?"

"I'm afraid I'm not much of a player. In fact, I hardly know the game," said Sir Hubert, sheepishly.

"One of them will teach you," said the mother.

"Will you?" abruptly asked Sir Hubert of Etta, who stood close by, racket in hand. Ica, poor child, had lost her chance. She could not play lawn-tennis in a riding-habit, and had gone to change.

"Oh yes," replied Etta, not very warmly; "but I am not much of a hand at it myself."

"You will wait for Ica?" interposed the mother, rather anxiously.

But the remark was lost upon the others, who had already moved towards the lawn-tennis ground. Etta, a true daughter of Eve, enjoyed admiration, and was perhaps not ill pleased to cut her elder sister out. When Ica returned, poor thing, Sir Hubert never looked at her. He was too much absorbed in his game, too attentive to the sweet voice of his instructress, too much fascinated with her shapely figure as she flew to and fro about the lawn.

"I call it the most barefaced poaching," Ica said, with tears in her eyes. "It's far too bad of Etta; Captain Sutton ought to know. Why isn't she satisfied with one, the disgraceful flirt?"

"I really don't think she is encouraging him," protested Mrs Parker. "It is all on his side."

Ica looked at her mother reproachfully; there was no consolation in the remark.

Discord had entered the Wyndham-Parker

family with Sir Hubert Lezaire. There was ill blood between the sisters, and the old people were in a dilemma.

"My dear, it is most unfortunate," said the General to his wife when Sir Hubert had gone. "I am monstrously annoyed, and hardly know what to do. We had better get Etta out of the way."

"Where is she to go? Not back to Plymouth. Captain Sutton, you know, is still there."

"Hang the fellow! yes. I don't want another pauper in the family. Richards is bad enough."

"Well, but, Wilfrid, why should we do anything? Why not let things take their course?"

"Maria, Ica is the oldest: it is her turn first."

"I know that. But still it seems such a pity to let the chance slip. I feel sure he is smitten with Etta, and it would be such a very easy way out of the Sutton entanglement. Sir Hubert would be such a much better match."

"It's against my principles," said the Gen-

eral. "At any rate, we won't give way yet. We may be all wrong; it may be only fancy about Etta."

"There can be no question of his admiration. The only doubt is how she will accept it."

"I thought she seemed pleased with his attentions."

"On the surface, yes. But that is because she is cutting out and carrying off another girl's prize. I'm not so sure she would take him even if he offered."

"You do not think Etta would be so mad as to refuse Sir Hubert and £20,000 a-year?"

"She won't give up Captain Sutton very easily, whatever the temptation. Money is not everything with young girls, and in personal advantages Captain Sutton has, I expect, far the best of it."

"You mustn't let her be such a fool. I look to you, Maria, to warn her, to put her best interests plainly before her."

"Then you don't object to her having the precedence of her elder sister?"

"I don't think we ought to let Straddlethorpe go out of the family," the General replied.

There was an angry discussion between the two sisters in the privacy of their own bedroom that night.

"I couldn't help it," protested Etta. "He came after me of his own accord."

"You should have snubbed him. What would Captain Sutton say? I am quite sorry for him, poor fellow," retorted Ica, too proud to lay any stress on her own wrongs.

"Sam can take care of himself. We quite understand each other. Our engagement is sure to be a long one, and we have agreed that we are both to enjoy ourselves."

"Then you did enjoy it to-day. I was sure of it."

"I didn't. I don't care that for Sir Hubert Lezaire. You are welcome to him, if you can get him. I think him an ugly, ill-bred, forward little cad."

"I'd like to tell him what you say."

"Do so. He won't thank you or believe you, and will come after me all the same."

"Yes, and you would take him in the end, in spite of all you say now. Henrietta, you're an untruthful, deceitful, dishonourable, wicked girl."

"That's mere jealousy and disappointment."

"I don't want him either."

"Grapes are sour, my dear."

"But I am sorry for Sam."

"Leave Sam alone, Frederica," cried Etta, blazing out, as such quiet equable tempers sometimes will. "That's the second time you've pitied him, and he don't want it, dear honest old Sam."

And suddenly changing in tone, she took out a photograph which was carefully kept under lock and key, and kissed it again and again.

"And that's the man you're going to throw over!"

"I'm not. How dare you say such a thing?"

"You let another man make love to you."

"That's a wicked untruth. And if I did! Oh, Sam, you old dear, why are you so far away?"

Fickle, flighty, inscrutable young person! Made seemingly to be the torment of both sexes; give one the heartache, and fill the other with envy, hatred, and all uncharitableness.

CHAPTER XL.

A ROW WITH MRS LELEU.

A VERY close intimacy now sprang up between Straddlethorpe and Hazelgrove. Both sides laboured hard to foster it. Messages came and went; little attentions were constantly exchanged. The Hall sent fruit and flowers, fine peaches and choice exotics, from its acres of glass; the Grove returned the compliment, with pressing invitations to go over to lunch and lawn-tennis, often to dine and spend the night.

Sir Hubert was always on his best behaviour, although his manners continued uncouth; he was so evidently anxious to appear to advantage before Etta, whom he singled out more

and more from her sisters and worshipped openly, but in a shy calf-like fashion, very different from his usual bold and boisterous wooings.

He made very little progress with her, however. As a rule, Etta avoided him, and where this was impossible, she seldom threw him a civil word. Only now and again, when the spirit of mischief was uppermost, just to tease her sister or test her influence, she would drop her eyes coquettishly when he spoke to her, and softly lower her voice in reply. While Hubert's passionate nature was thus maddened with delusive hope, poor Ica would cry with vexation, and vow that Captain Sutton should be told what was going on.

The acquaintance was some weeks old before the ladies from Hazelgrove accepted the hospitalities of the Hall. The General had been there frequently, but that did not matter. It was different for Mrs Wyndham-Parker and the girls, whose visit to a bachelor establishment would have looked rather marked, and

added greatly to the malicious gossip already afloat.

But Sir Hubert, growing more and more pressing, would take no denial. They must come over, all of them, to lunch and spend the day. Why not stay over the day? His new coach had come down; he would drive them back—with Etta on the box-seat, if she would accept it—and they could help him to decide about the new team he was trying.

He gave due notice—a little too timidly, perhaps—to Mrs Leleu.

"I am expecting a large party the day after to-morrow, and shall want six bedrooms—the best—and that Spanish room, you know."

"Who's coming?" asked the housekeeper abruptly. They were alone, and her manner was scarcely respectful. It seemed as though she could never forget the days when she ordered and he obeyed.

"Look here!" he began, bravely enough, but his heart sank when he met her fierce eyes.

"It's those Wyndham-Parkers, I suppose. Mean, cadging, calculating lot!"

"They're friends of mine. I won't have you talk like that."

"Oh, I know, and what they're after. But mark my words, Sir Hubert: once let them get foothold in the Hall, and they'll take possession of it, and you too. Cock them up, for a set of paupers, chucking their girls at every man's head!"

"They don't; and the girls ain't the kind to let them."

"You're silly about that white-faced one, Etta. More fool you! If you knew as much of her as I did!"

"What do you know against her?" Hubert asked fiercely.

"What every one else does but you," was the enigmatic reply.

"You must and shall tell me. Out with it! Go on!"

"Why, it's common talk. This Miss Etta has

another lover; he comes down to see her on the sly."

"If I come across him, if I should ever meet them together,"—a black murderous look came into Hubert's dark face,—"it will be the worse for him. I'd do for him, kill him before her very eyes!"

"Don't say that too openly, then, or the words may be remembered against you. Of course, it don't matter with me; I can hold my tongue. I've done so already," she added, darkly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"That I am as wide awake as most people, and I have had the chance, perhaps, of seeing more."

Sir Hubert looked at her with astonishment.

"Are you threatening me? Don't do that; don't stir up my bad blood. I am not afraid of you—there's no reason why I should be—but——"

"But let's speak plain. It's a good op-

portunity, Sir Hubert, and I should like you to know what kind of woman I am."

Sir Hubert now seemed scared, as he listened with staring eyes.

"I'm not the sort to put up with an injury, nor do I easily forget a kindness. Scratch me, and I'll scratch you; but at the first crooked word, the first evil turn, I mean mischief."

"You can't harm me."

"I could ruin you, Hubert Lezaire, utterly, if only I held up my hand."

And with this, making a mocking defiant curtsey, the housekeeper left the room.

They did not meet again for a day or two. The Wyndham-Parkers came and filled up the Hall. Once again the spacious old dining-room echoed merry laughter; female skirts rustled along its halls; the whole place was lightened and made pretty with the litter of work, the books and flowers, that women gather round them.

Mrs Wyndham-Parker was a first-rate housewife. Sharp experience had taught her—ex-

perience gained in many lands with servants of every creed and colour, but she had a truly Dutch love of cleanliness. Economy was her strong point, but she was an authority on butcher's meat, its cost and quantity, knowing to an ounce how much could and ought to be eaten. She was a perfect terror to her own housemaids as regards washing and dusting. Nothing escaped her quick eye; her nimble finger passed along the top of a chair instantly detected slovenliness or neglect. Before she had been twenty-four hours in Straddlethorpe Hall, she had looked very narrowly into its internal organisation, and had come to the conclusion that it was her bounden duty to open Sir Hubert's eyes.

"My dear boy," she said—her manner was quite maternal by this time—"you really ought to know; I am afraid you are being robbed right and left. It's always the way with you poor men."

"Robbed! Who by?" the young baronet asked, not without misgiving.

"In the first place, your servants do not earn their keep, much less their wages. Why, the passage-windows have not been cleaned for months. But that's not the worst: I see by the books—the butcher's and grocer's, you know—that you are paying just forty per cent too much for everything."

"Are you sure, Mrs Wyndham-Parker? How did you find out?"

"I took the liberty, in your interests, of course, of speaking to the housekeeper——"

"Mrs Leleu?" said Hubert, nervously.

"Is that her name? Yes, Mrs Leleu. Well, I don't wish to make any unpleasantness, but, my dear Sir Hubert, if I were you I'd part with her—the sooner the better. If it's not her doing—I mean if she is not robbing you herself, she lets others do so, and therefore she is equally to blame."

"Oh, well, she saves me trouble; I can't be bothered with these things," Sir Hubert stammered out at last. Mrs Wyndham-Parker's advice took him rather aback. What if this

terrible housekeeper would not go? "If I send her away, some other beast will come and do just the same."

"There is only one kind of honest housekeeper for a man in your position, and that is—a wife."

He looked at her ruefully, and the fond mother interpreted it as grief at Etta's floutings.

But Sir Hubert was much more concerned at the prospect of words with Mrs Leleu. He had, indeed, resolved to say nothing to her for the present—to attempt no fault-finding, to give her no hint of impending notice—when to his surprise the housekeeper herself broached the subject.

Mrs Leleu sought him out in his own den—that which had been Colonel St Evelyn's.

"I'm not going to put up with that woman's interference," she began, with intentional rudeness, as it seemed. "You must choose between us. I won't stay if she's coming to ride the high horse at the Hall."

"What woman, Mrs Leleu? If it's any of

the servants, you can bunk them all when you please."

"It's Mrs Wyndham-Parker; and you know it as well as I do. Let her stay and skin flints at home, and lock up the bread-basket, and harry, and drive, and starve. Why, not a girl will stop at the Grove beyond her month. So make up your mind."

"If you really want to leave, Mrs Leleu——" said the baronet timidly, trying fair words.

"I'll leave sooner than be put upon. But if I go, it must be made worth my while."

"You shall have a first-rate character——"

"Yah! I want more than a character. I don't mean to work any more. There's that between us—— Look here, Hubert Lezaire, you could not drive me out if I chose to stay. But I'd rather go, only you'll have to pay the piper"

"You can go to Mr Tinson. He shall pay you——"

"I don't advise you to send me to Mr Tinson, unless you're prepared for——"

"How much do you want?"

"Five hundred pounds a-year to begin with —more if I choose to ask."

"I won't give you five hundred pence."

"Be careful, Hubert Lezaire; don't provoke me; don't drive me to use my power, for you are in my power—body and soul."

CHAPTER XLI.

GENTEEL PAUPERS.

A NUMBER of members were discussing Colonel St Evelyn in the smoking-room of the "Battle-axe and Banner."

"St Evelyn will have to go now, of course," said one man with the morning paper in his hand.

"The rule is explicit," said another, our acquaintance General Wyndham-Parker, whose business—he dabbled a good deal in stocks and shares—often brought him up to town. "The committee cannot protect or defend him any longer. It was quite monstrous last time; he ought to have gone then."

"What happened, sir?" asked a youngster with great eagerness. He liked to be on

familiar terms with a general officer, even one retired and undistinguished.

"Haven't you heard? I'll tell you the whole story." And the General, who stood first among button-holing, ceaseless-tongued club bores, fastened at once upon his victim. He retailed everything—the marriage, the murder, the contest for the Lezaire estates.

"He was tried for his life, then?"

"Undoubtedly. And, as I pointed out to the committee, he ought to have been called upon to resign the club."

"But, General, he was acquitted."

"All a mistake, a grave miscarriage of justice. The idea of keeping a murderer in the club!"

"He only killed his mother-in-law. I'd like to make away with mine," said a red-nosed major whose female relations were too much for him, report said, and who certainly came to the club for the whiskies-and-sodas he was denied at home.

"His brother-in-law, you mean. He wanted the property for his wife."

"Which he didn't get, every one knows that. But what has he done now?"

"Gone bankrupt. It's in the 'Times'; a receiving order granted. Here, look for yourself."

"I saw it as I came up to town," said the General, briskly. "I went up to the secretary's office directly I got here, to remind him that this St Evelyn ceases, *ipso facto*, to be a member of the club."

"Ill-conditioned old curmudgeon!" was the red-nosed major's comment as the General bustled away. "Trampling on people who are down! Old Wyndham-Parker's got a special grudge against St Evelyn."

"Oh! that's General Wyndham-Parker, is it?" said one of the previous speakers, a tall, slim young fellow with very white teeth, rather prominent eyes, and crisp curly hair.

"Yes; don't you know the old fossil?"

"I've never seen him before, but I have heard of him, and from him. Wish I hadn't." The speaker was Captain Sutton, Etta's Sam

Sutton, who had had some unpleasant correspondence with the General with regard to the engagement.

"It's deuced hard upon St Evelyn though. I'm sorry for him, and I'd like to do him a good turn if I could."

"So would I," added Sutton, "just to spite the General. Where does he hang out? Has any one seen him?"

"I was speaking to his man Gibbings,—smart little chap, you know, often has a bit of news—he's at some livery stables in Kensington now,—and from what he said—not much I admit—St Evelyn's in Queer Street."

"What! got the knock?"

"Flat. He'll have to go under. What else is a fellow to do when he's clean broke?"

"Take a crossing, or travel as a courier, or turn commissionaire."

"Or drive a bus, like Pump Middleton, who was in the Prancers. I give you my word, I saw him in the Edgeware Road on the box, and a fellow, a sort of pay-sergeant or cash-clerk,

came out and gave him two half-crowns. And Pump told me—I got up alongside him—that those five bob a-day were all that stood between him and the workhouse."

"Well, and there's Chick Faulkner, who had all that Scotch property, kept a yacht and a string of hunters. He's got a lodging-house at Ramsgate, and wheels the perambulator when he isn't cleaning the knives."

"St Evelyn's a managing, business-like chap. He ought to find something to do."

"'Tisn't so easy at his time of life. Besides, the market's overstocked with chaps like him. He'll find it hard, deuced hard, to get a fresh start."

It was simply impossible, that was the fact, and St Evelyn after a month's trial began almost to despair.

They had a little lodging in Hammersmith, one small sitting-room, a bedroom for themselves, and another for the three little children that now added so seriously to his anxieties for the future. A single servant, a grimy but

good-natured marchioness, "did" for the whole house, and was more than willing to serve the St Evelyns—high folk who had lived at a Hall and kept their own man. But she nearly drowned one of the babies in the bath, and half poisoned herself and her friend the policeman by deep potations of the Colonel's hair-wash, which was called Bay Rum.

Upon Rachel, the true-hearted, uncomplaining, always devoted wife, the gentle, delicately nurtured lady, fell much of the housework: she was nurse, of course—Minta, the marchioness, was no more to be trusted; she essayed to cook; she plied the needle; she "valeted" her Colonel, and strove hard to turn him out as smart as ever, well brushed and cared for, when he started on his long and fruitless pilgrimages in search of employment.

But there was one old stanch adherent and humble friend always ready to help and relieve her. Gibbings, sorely against his will, had yielded to the commands laid upon him by the Colonel, and had at last taken another place.

He had become head-groom and confidential man at a large livery-yard in Kensington. But whenever he was free—on an evening and always on Sundays—he came over to Hammersmith and gave all his time to the St Evelyns.

The old soldier could turn his hand to anything; could rock a cradle, make soup, cook, and sew.

"I'll just run my eye over the master's things, ma'am." The Colonel would be Gibbings's master for all time. "The boots will be the better for a touch of varnish, and I'd like to iron up his best hat," he said one evening.

"The Colonel's wearing it, Gibbings. He had to keep a particular appointment."

"Something he's heard of, ma'am? Of course he'll get it. They've only got to know he's seeking employment, and all London will be bidding for him. What else can I be doing, ma'am? I think I'll step down to the kitchen and see after the supper-tray."

Next minute he was taking the little maid to task sharply.

"D'ye call them tea-things clean, Minta? A lick and a scrape won't do for me, or my master and mistress."

"'Tain't my fault, Mr Gibbons. I've been that driven and dratted to-day, I'm a-fit to tear myself to shregs."

"Well, Minta, you ain't a bad sort, so dry your eyes. Some of these fine days I'll take you out and show you life. What 'd you like best? Tea and shrimps at Woolwich Gardens, or a trip to Harwich in the sixpenny roller?"

"Will you though, Mr Gibbons? Will you take me for a walk when they gives me my next Sunday out? I won't disgrace you. I've a new plush mantill, and a black satin skirt, and there's fruit and flowers in my 'at."

"You can put 'em all on, only mind you wash your face. But there's the bell, and I think I hear your missus. You'd better hurry up, or she'll have your hair."

The grimy maid ran off in answer to the loud shouts of "Araminta! Araminta!" but presently returned to say—

"Your Colonel gentleman's come in, and the lady says I'm to take up the tray."

"Stand off, Minta—no one touches that tray but me. But you can watch the chops—let them toast, d'ye see, and turn them every three minutes by the clock. Mind now, or you won't go out next Sunday."

When Gibbings entered the little sitting-room, he found the Colonel downcast, dejected, ruefully talking with Mrs St Evelyn.

"It was no good, my dear. I stayed there to the last."

"Where was it, dearest?"

"General Superintendent's office on the North-East Extension Railway. I had heard they wanted help in the traffic department."

"Who did you see?"

"The general manager himself, I believe. A gentlemanly fellow enough, and civil too, but he wouldn't have anything to say to me."

"Oh, Ferdinand!"

"It was the old story. 'What have you been? A colonel? In the army?' 'Yes, the

Halberdiers—commanded the second battalion.' 'Won't suit us. Good day.' I'm fit for nothing, that's the fact, I suppose."

"What! you, sir? The idea!" protested Gibbings.

"Good evening, Gibbings," said the Colonel. "I wish it depended upon your good word."

"You should have it, sir. We'd make you —what? Governor of the Bank of England, or Master of the Queen's Horse. Wouldn't we, ma'am?"

"Yes, Gibbings. But I tell the Colonel he must not be cast down. He's certain to succeed if only he perseveres."

"I'd take anything, anywhere—abroad even, although it might oblige me to go away alone."

"You wouldn't leave us behind, Ferdinand? I could not, would not leave you."

"But the children, my dear. Suppose I went to South America or to the Panama Canal: they want overseers there, and as I speak languages I might get a billet there.

We could not take the children to a tropical climate."

Rachel was tortured to decide, but her wifely loyalty overcame the maternal instinct, and she said bravely—

"It would half kill me to part with the children, but where you go I go, Ferdinand, whatever happens."

St Evelyn knew what it cost her to say this, and he kissed her tenderly.

"But why should you leave England, sir?' put in Gibbings. "I've an idea of something that would suit you, I think. Not much, perhaps, or very first class, but you could make a living at it, I'm sure."

"Well, what is it, Gibbings? Don't be afraid to tell me: I'm sure I'm not proud."

"It's in our line, livery, with a fair chance of buying and selling. Now, sir, with your eye for a horse and your knowledge, why, if you'd condescend to give your attention to it, why, there's money in it—a fortune, I do believe."

"And this business is going begging, Gibbings? It's to be had for the asking?"

"Not quite that, sir. But a hundred pounds would buy the goodwill, and with another for capital——"

"I'm not worth two hundred pounds, Gibbings."

"No; but I am, sir. Ay, and more. And if so be as you'll accept the loan and let me work with you, sir——"

Rachel jumped from her seat and seized Gibbings's hand.

"My good Gibbings! how can we thank you for your kindness?"

"'Tain't nothing, ma'am; if the Colonel will only say yes."

St Evelyn had not spoken: he was too much touched to find suitable words. But he too rose, and placing his hand upon his loyal henchman's shoulder, said presently—

"There are not many like you, my honest, trusty friend. You've been true as steel, stanch as an ash-plant, from the day I first

took you until now. But I'm not going to rob you of your hard earnings."

"How could I have put 'em together but for you, sir?" replied Gibbings, with a husky voice. "You won't disappoint me, I hope, by refusing. We'd make a fine thing of it, sir, believe me."

"He will not refuse," said Rachel, gently. "It would be unkind, ungenerous, to refuse such an offer and from so true a friend."

"I won't. If nothing else turns up within this week, Gibbings, I will accept, and most gratefully, what you propose. There is my hand on it. And now let's have something to eat, for I'm sharp set."

The Colonel was never demonstrative, and he had made already an unusual display of feeling.

Minta brought up the chops, very much burnt and overdone, and feeling that Gibbings's eye was upon her, began to apologise.

"'Twarn't my fault, Mr Gibbons. The fire was owdacious, and the postman come in the middle, and I had to take up second floor's lot—he goes on so about his preufs, as he calls 'em."

"Any letters for us, Araminta?" asked Mrs St Evelyn, gently checking the flow of explanation.

"Only this, ma'am," and Minta drew a long envelope from inside the waist-string of her whitey-brown apron.

"For you, Ferdinand."

"From the North-Eastern Extension Railway! What can they have to say? Why, they didn't even ask my address."

He opened the letter. It was a brief but courteous offer of a situation as ticket-clerk at Harrop's Green at a salary of two guineas per week. If this was thought worthy of his acceptance, Mr St Evelyn was begged to reply without delay, as there were other applicants for the post.

"I don't understand it one bit," said St Evelyn. "They held out no hopes while I was there."

"Who does the letter come from?"

"The general manager: he signs his name—Sutton."

"Sutton?" said Gibbings. "There was a Captain Sutton of the South Stalkshire came and found me out the other day, and asked a lot of questions about you, Colonel: wanted to know what you were doing."

"Did you tell him?"

"Not much, sir. But I gave him your address."

"I don't know why he should befriend me, but it seems as if he has. I can't explain it otherwise."

"And this offer—will you take it, Ferdinand?"

"It would be wicked to turn my back on such an opening. It will spare you, my good Gibbings, and may lead to better things."

CHAPTER XLII.

HARROP'S GREEN.

The immediate result of the change in St Evelyn's prospects was a change also in residence. They had to move at once to Harrop's Green, a small suburb in the north-eastern wilds of London, inhabited mostly by artisans and city clerks, all of whom travelled by the line in and out of town. There were one or two factories with large works in the neighbourhood, and at no great distance a People's Palace and gardens, which on great *fêtes* and functions might be reached not without crowding and inconvenience from Harrop's Green.

The work into which St Evelyn was soon initiated was intermittent, and varied from time

to time. It began early, in the small hours indeed, the first workman's train in being at 4.30 A.M. It ended late, the last train out being at 1.30 A.M. But St Evelyn had a mate who divided the total twenty-one hours of duty with him turn and turn about, taking early and late hours alternately.

"It's no worse than going on guard," said St Evelyn cheerily, when his Rachel pitied him as he went off yawning. "Only I didn't expect to go back to subaltern's duty."

But his early training was of signal service to him now. Certain habits which had become second nature with him stood him in good stead. He had learnt as a soldier to be punctual and particular in the performanee of his daily task. Tell him what to do and he did it exactly. He was never late for parade, even at early dawn; never late, although he had to shave by candle-light. This was another inviolable rule: to turn out for duty spick and span, as smart as soap and water and clothes-brush could make him. He would

have felt it a disgrace to appear at the ticket-office in the slovenly, ungroomed, out-at-elbows condition of his fellow-clerk, a lanky, round-shouldered youth, who neither brushed his hair nor cleaned his nails, nor had his boots blacked from week's end to week's end.

Gentle Rachel, with her woman's adaptability, had quickly imbibed her husband's punctilious ideas, and was a willing, nay, eager helpmate. She did her part as scrupulously as he did his. At the first sound of the alarm-clock she turned out of bed, lit the Etna, prepared the shaving-water and the hot drink of chocolate which fortified St Evelyn from the cold morning air; she brushed his overcoat and his now seedy but well-shaped hat, and saw there was no dust on the shiny boots St Evelyn himself polished overnight. When she had sent him to his work, she busied herself like a charwoman—saw to the children and the house, prepared her husband's breakfast and took it to him herself, waiting by his side in the little den of an office while he ate it

amidst the ledgers, and told her the morning's news.

It was nearly always the same story.

"Tremendous rush this morning: a hundred and seventeen tickets issued in less than an hour."

"And have you balanced your cash, dear?" asked Rachel, anxiously.

This was his great trouble. While still unfamiliar with prices, he often had to perform rapid sums of intricate mental arithmetic; calculate exactly the amount of fare and give the correct change. Not seldom he was wrong; when others suffered, he heard of it at once, generally in rough indignant language, but no one told him when the mistake was against himself. Of course he had to abide by his errors. The Company made no allowance for mistakes; deficits came out of the clerk's own pocket.

"Balanced it within three-halfpence, my child. But I was uncommonly near done, all the same."

"Bad money again? How wicked people are! What was it?"

"Half a sovereign, no less. But I found it out, luckily, and there was a fine row. As it was, they threatened to report me, and I suppose I shall hear more of it again."

"But were you sure it was bad, dear?"

"I wouldn't have been last week. But ever since Gibbings brought his friend the detective from the bank, I'd back myself to tell a dead 'un directly I touch it. But there, dear, I must not talk, I have got to enter my morning's work."

St Evelyn opened one of the great ledgers labelled "Train Book," and proceeded to record the number of tickets he had issued to each station.

Meanwhile Rachel was engaged in packing up her basket, preparing to take her leave.

"I shall see you at lunch, dear, or rather dinner, at mid-day?"

"No; we will dine late to-night. And Gibbings is coming up, I fancy."

At this moment there was a rap at the ticket-window, to which St Evelyn promptly responded.

"Can I get on to the Great Western from here, so as to catch the 9.15 express from Paddington?"

St Evelyn hesitated. This was only one of dozens of similar questions asked him, but with his limited experience the answer was not immediately forthcoming.

"Dear, dear, do be quick! Surely you know: what is the use of you? I shall complain to the general manager. What is your name?"

All this was spoken splutteringly, and in an abrupt, peremptory tone.

"I am very sorry," replied St Evelyn apologetically, but with difficulty restraining his temper. "I am new to the work here——"

"It's preposterous. You ought to have been instructed before you were put on duty. How much longer am I to wait?"

"Not another second. I find you can just do it by taking the next through train to Westbourne Park."

"Very well. First return, Reading!"

St Evelyn wetted his fingers on the sponge and drew a ticket from its particular tube, clicked it in the dating press, and threw it on the window-ledge, saying—

"Eleven and seven."

There was a pause. The traveller was fumbling in all his pockets.

"Dear, dear, how extraordinary! My purse —I must have left home without it. I cannot pay, I'm afraid," he began.

St Evelyn promptly drew back the ticket. Short as was his experience, he was on the alert for fraud.

"What on earth am I to do?" went on the traveller, speaking to himself, but audibly. "I shall never have time to get back, and the carriage has gone. I suppose," he ventured to say, quite humbly, to St Evelyn, "you won't trust me till this evening?"

St Evelyn laughed, not unpleasantly. The complete change in the other's manner really amused him.

"It's distinctly against the rules, and if by any chance you should forget——"

"But I will give you my name and address. It is of the utmost importance to me to get to Reading at once—a matter of business that will not wait. What would you advise me to do?"

"I cannot advise," replied St Evelyn, stolidly. "If I gave you the ticket, it would be at my own risk, and I cannot afford to lose eleven and seven nowadays. It would make too big a hole in my week's salary."

"But you shan't lose it, I tell you. I give you my word."

St Evelyn was still obdurate, when he heard Rachel whisper—

"Let him have it, Ferdinand. I think he is a gentleman. He speaks like one."

"You will give me your name and address?"

"Most certainly, and you shall have your money to-night, at latest. Will you give me a piece of paper and pen and ink?"

St Evelyn opened the booking-office door and civilly invited the gentleman inside.

He was a stout, plethoric-looking man, with a crimson face and white hair.

"My wife," he said, "Mrs St Evelyn," introducing her as though she were a duchess; and Rachel's appearance, with the dignified bow she gave the visitor, so satisfied him that he was in the presence of a lady, that he at once removed his hat. When he had written down his address, he handed it to St Evelyn, and his eye fell with some surprise upon the ticket-clerk—upon the tall, straight figure of the neatly dressed, well-mannered man who was an employee of the company at two guineas a-week.

"You have not been here long, you say?"

"Only five weeks."

"And you like your work? It is new to you, I think?"

"I have to earn my living," said St Evelyn, simply. "But there!" The telegraph signal clicked overhead. "There is the down train, and here is your ticket. You will only just have time."

"Who is it?" asked Rachel, rather interested to know the name of the man to whom they had practically lent eleven and sevenpence.

"Carrington Lomas, Birch Hill House, Enfield, Herts," replied St Evelyn, reading off the paper. "Never heard of him before, but I sincerely hope to hear of him again, and not later than this evening, as he said."

When St Evelyn came home that evening from the railway station, he was triumphant.

"Look here, Rachel, do you like strawberries? Here is a present for you from Mr Carrington Lomas."

"He sent back the money, then?"

"Yes, and these for you, with his compliments and a card. You deserve them. I should never have lent him the money but for you."

"He is an old dear. If he only knew how fond I was of strawberries! And the children take after me."

"So does Gibbings; you had better save some for him."

"Gibbings is here—hard at work, of course, from the moment he came in."

"Any news? What have you got to say for yourself, Gibbings?" he went on to his man, who at this moment appeared.

"Only this, sir, that I am going down to Thorpeshire next week. Any commands that way, sir, or you, ma'am?"

"Shall you be near Straddlethorpe?" asked the Colonel, while his wife sat sadly silent, thinking of the old home.

"Why, of course. I am going to Castle Stutterton horse-fair. It's not many miles across to the Hall, and I am curious to know how things go on there."

"So am I," said the Colonel. "Mind you bring us a full and particular account."

"I will, sir; and I will bring you, ma'am, as big a bunch of flowers as I can carry, if I have to steal them from the gardens on purpose."

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE HORSE-FAIR.

THE annual horse-fair at Castle Stutterton was an event of more than local importance. It attracted buyers from all parts of the country, from the Continent even, and for some years had been visited by German cavalry officers, who bid for blood stock against the military representatives of the French republic.

The little village town was thronged; beds were at a premium; every stable, or outhouse that would serve as such, could have been let a dozen times over; and long lines of horses brought in from far and near were picketed all day in the principal streets of the place.

Gibbings, whose business was to buy a couple

of useful hacks for his employer's livery work, found many friends at Castle Stutterton. He had come to be well known in Thorpeshire, and all Thorpeshire was here, the highest and the lowest. Lord Prudhames and the county magnates, horse-jobbers without end, gentlemen's coachmen on the look-out for their masters, and a perfect *posse* of tatterdemalion riff-raff—grooms, helpers, gipsies, and thieves.

"What cheer, Gibbings?—you back in these parts! What brings you here?"

The speaker was Thorndike, the ex-farm bailiff of Straddlethorpe, with whom Gibbings had always been on fairly familiar terms.

"Mr Thorndike, how goes it? Still at the old place?"

"Not I. I took my hook when the new baronet came. I didn't like it, but I couldn't serve such trash as that."

"How does he get along? Has he swore off?"

"'Tain't likely. But they do say he's sweet

on one of the Hazelgrove girls, and that keeps him straight."

"I'd like to see the old place. Wonder whether they'd let me in at the Hall. Who's there now—any old friends?"

"All the upper servants left but Peters—even Mrs Leleu."

"What! the black-faced housekeeper? That's news. I am surprised. She and Hubert were always such friends."

"It was too thick to last. Besides, think of their altered stations. And I'm told they had a stand-up fight before they parted."

"Peters 'll be the next, I take it."

"Not he, unless he's driven to it. He'd stand almost anything to keep his place. It must be worth a pretty penny to him."

"Will Sir Hubert be here to-day, think you?"

"As sure as eggs. He'll bring his team over. That's the great game nowadays, driving a four-in-hand with a pack of missies on the box."

And that was how Sir Hubert Lezaire arrived. Gibbings was standing in the main street as the Straddlethorpe drag drove up, dexterously but rather recklessly handled by its madcap whip. The roadway was thronged, as I have said; hundreds of horses stood in rows on each side — buyers came and went amongst them, some mounted, some on foot; there were other vehicles moving slowly along the crowded thoroughfare, and it was no place to bring up a four-in-hand so fast. But on came Sir Hubert, with horn and holloa and strident hi's! driving headlong into the press. The people parted hastily to either side, giving passage as best they could, but indignantly; and the excitement spread rapidly through the crowd even to the horses, which whinnied and stamped and plunged, greatly increasing the confusion of the scene.

"Pull him off! Knock him over! Drag him down!" were the cries that resounded on every side.

But Sir Hubert only flogged his horses the

more savagely, contemptuously, till his own team grew almost unmanageable and out of hand. The leaders reared, the wheelers put their heads down and pulled double. There were shrieks from the ladies; the grooms behind were preparing to dismount hastily to give help.

Just at this moment Gibbings rushed promptly to the head of the most restive horse, the near leader, and partly by force, partly by soothing words, quieted him; then he shifted quickly to the off leader, and was equally successful.

"Thank you, my man, thank you. Come to me at the White Horse and I will remember you," cried the young baronet as he drove on, sobered and steadied by his late danger.

Gibbings an hour later put in an appearance at the White Horse, thinking less perhaps of his expected tip than of what Sir Hubert would say on recognising him. But it was not easy to gain access to the young baronet. He had a luncheon-party, having secured two of the

best rooms of the country inn and sent over everything from the Hall.

While Gibbings waited at the inn door, a gentleman who had passed once or twice and examined him rather curiously, came up, saying—

"If I am not mistaken, you are Colonel St Evelyn's man, Gibbings?"

"That is my name," replied Gibbings, rather curtly.

"You don't remember me, I think—Captain Sutton."

"Why, of course, sir. I thought I knew your face. Come down to buy?"

"Well, yes, in a way. Are you very busy? Would you care to earn a sovereign? I want a helping hand."

"At your service, sir. Always glad to be of use to a gentleman, especially one as is kind to my old master—for you were that, weren't you, sir?"

Sutton laughed, but shook his head.

"It wasn't much I did, anyhow. I only spoke to my brother. But listen, Gibbings—

there's a luncheon-party up-stairs, and some one at it I want to see."

"Not Sir Hubert, by any chance? I came to see him too."

"No, I will be frank with you—a young lady. Now when they all come down and go through the fair, as they are bound to do, if you could help to keep him—this Lezaire, I mean—and the rest of them while I have a few minutes' talk with the young lady, the sovereign is yours. That's what I want you to do. You understand?"

Gibbings touched his hat.

"I'm your man, sir. But may I make so bold as to ask who is the young lady? I might help you, you know, with the wrong one."

Sutton hesitated at first, then said—

"It's Miss Wyndham-Parker—Miss Etta."

"Her he's sweet on—Sir Hubert, I mean?"

Sutton winced.

"I fancy so. But now you know, see what you can do."

"Trust me to try my best, sir; you stand

by. I have got to speak to Sir Hubert—he himself told me to come. The girl, the young lady, I mean, is sure to be with him, or we will wait till she is; then I will engage his attention. Only you be ready, sir."

Presently the whole party came down-stairs and into the street,—the little General and Mrs Wyndham-Parker leading, then Mrs Richards, the married daughter, and one of the other girls, then Captain Richards and Ica, last of all Sir Hubert and Etta, as Gibbings had supposed.

The stir and bustle of the fair centred at the White Horse, and there was much movement just in front of its entrance. The Wyndham-Parkers were soon involved in the crowd, father and mother pressing on all the more confidently as they knew or believed that their daughter Etta was in safe hands. But as planned, Gibbings went up to Sir Hubert at once, saying—

"You told me to call, sir. It was I who lent a hand with your team just now."

"Ah! it was you, was it? Well, you

deserve half a couter. I'll stop it from Peters: the old fool ought to have been more slippy."

Sir Hubert felt in his pocket, handed Gibbings his half-sovereign, and was turning to regain his companion, who had however already disappeared, when a hand was laid heavily on his shoulder, and an angry voice cried—

"I've found you, have I, you young Podifat Lezaire! I want five words with you."

"Stand aside! I don't know you—don't want to. Let me pass."

"Don't know me, you infernal young blackguard! You were glad enough to know me and mine last spring when you deluded my poor girl."

"You're old Fieldus, I suppose," said Sir Hubert, insolently. "What have you got to say to me?"

"Just this—but come along inside." Old Fieldus forced rather than led the young baronet into the inn yard, Gibbings following close. "I never thought to have to ask it, but

you have got to make an honest woman of my girl. You promised to marry her, and you shall."

"I'm d——d if I do! There!"

"I hardly hoped you meant fair by her, but now I'm down in your own country and find out your carryings-on. It's clear you want to break your word. But you shall pay for it, old as I am."

Mr Fieldus seized Sir Hubert by the collar and flourished a heavy cutting-whip over his head.

"Old as I am," he repeated, "I will flog handsomely first and sue you in the courts afterwards."

In spite of Sir Hubert's struggles, Mr Fieldus succeeded in administering one or two sharp strokes to the young man's back, when Gibbings interposed, separated the combatants, and stood between Mr Fieldus and his prey.

"Here," said the old soldier, "you strike one of your own size and age. Don't mind him, Sir Hubert; I'll see fair play."

But by this time others, strangers and friends, had prevailed upon the infuriated chemist to desist from his assault, and had carried him off into the inn, still shouting loud threats against Sir Hubert Lezaire.

Gibbings, left master of the field, turned to the young fellow he had so seasonably championed, and said—

"Hope you are not hurt, Sir Hubert. What an audacious old villain! He ought to be put in a strait-jacket, or, anyway, have his whip taken from him."

Sir Hubert, at first sullen and crestfallen, made a great effort to regain his composure.

"That's the second time you've stood by me. Give me your hand."

"I was glad to help you, Sir Hubert. I suppose you don't remember me? It's Gibbings, who used to be at the Hall."

"Gibbings!" cried Sir Hubert, suspiciously. "What are you doing in Thorpeshire?"

"Come to buy horses for my masters, Lund & Meldrum of Kensington."

"Then you are not with the Colonel now?"

"Dear, no, Sir Hubert! left him ages ago."

"Don't care to see him again, I suppose, now he's down in the world without a mag to bless himself with."

"That's about it. But how's all going on at the Hall, Sir Hubert?"

"Come over and see for yourself, any day after the fair; or this evening, for I think I shall go straight home."

He wished to put as many miles as possible between himself and Mr Fieldus's horsewhip.

"I wonder what's become of all my lot? Good day to you, Gibbings: see you next time."

And with that the young baronet dived into the crowd to rejoin the Wyndham-Parkers. When he found them Etta was with them again, but she must have had a very pleasant half-hour's *tête-à-tête* with her devoted Sam.

CHAPTER XLIV.

LIBERTY HALL.

Gibbings did not despatch his business till the second day of the fair, when he bought his two nags and sent them up to town. It was on the third morning that he found his way to Straddlethorpe, and relying on Sir Hubert's invitation, went straight to the front door of the Hall.

"Sir Hubert?" responded the butler who opened it—a stranger to Gibbings, a watery-eyed, weak-kneed old man, battered but rubicund, who had probably found Straddlethorpe a haven of restful indulgence. "You can't see him."

"But he told me to call."

"You'll have to wait, then; he ain't down yet. Won't any one else do? Mr Peters, perhaps?" answered the butler, after a shrewd look at Gibbings and his somewhat sporting attire.

"Well—I know Mr Peters. We've been in service together."

"Not here? Yes? Why didn't you say so sooner? Come along in. Peters 'll be in the servants' hall most likely. It's our time for a snack, and he generally joins us."

The "snack" was a liberal meal: cold joints, hot pies, sweet dumplings, and bread and cheese, flanked by jugs of new milk and foaming tankards of ale.

"Dinner ain't till three," went on the butler, with a thick sensual laugh, "and we have to keep ourselves up till then. Where's Mr Peters?" he went on, looking round the room, in which some fifteen or twenty servants had assembled. "Not come in yet? Well, find a seat," he said to Gibbings. "Maybe there's some one else you know."

Gibbings saw only one he remembered amongst the lot of unfamiliar faces, a pleasant-looking young housemaid, with a fresh colour and honest eyes, beside whom he took his seat.

"It's a sight for sore eyes to see you so blooming, Susan Footit," he began.

"Lor', Mr Gibbings, how you made me start! Who'd a thought of seeing you?"

"Still in the old place, then?"

"And very sorry too. I ought to have left when the change was made, but they gave me a rise. I'm upper housemaid now——"

"Then surely you're well off?"

Susan shook her head gloomily.

"It's a bad look-out for any decent girl in this house. It's hard to keep straight in it with such goings-on."

It was evident at a glance: waste, riotous living, licence of all kind holding high revel all through the house.

"Don't you like Sir Hubert? Isn't he kind?"

"Kind!" The quick blush that mantled in her cheek, the indignant scorn in her voice, were tell-tales that Gibbings easily understood. "He's too civil by half when no one else is by."

"I should give notice if I were you. Take another place."

"That's where it is, Mr Gibbings. Who's to get a character from such a house as this? Who's to give one?"

"Why, the housekeeper, I suppose."

"Mrs Leleu went three weeks ago. She'd had enough of him. There was a fine row between them. I could hear them from the china drawing-room, which I was dusting."

"Quarrelled, eh?"

"All but came to blows. Sir Hubert turned her out of the house, you may say, then and there."

"Has no one come in Mrs Leleu's place?"

"There's no one engaged yet. Sir Hubert doesn't care. Everything may go to rack and ruin so long as he enjoys himself."

"He'll be getting married one of those days."

"He might like to, but the girl he most fancies won't have him, I expect, and that's what makes him so reckless. But I pity the woman who takes him. He was drunk again last night, he and the vile lot he brought over from the fair: no one could sleep for the row they made, singing and screeching and turning the Hall upside down. Married indeed! A fine husband he'll be."

"There are lots ready to be my lady and mistress of Straddlethorpe. They might reform him, you know, Susan. When he's a little older he'll settle down."

"I don't think it, Mr Gibbings. He's a bad un, or I'm much mistaken. Drinks to drown care. That's what Mrs Leleu meant. I heard her plain enough."

"From the china drawing-room?"

"I was passing the study door just then. She said she had him in her power, body and soul. Why should she say that unless he'd done something wrong?"

"Was that all you heard, Susan?"

"All. The door was ajar, and I did not dare stay. But that much I caught, every word."

Gibbings looked round as Susan Footit made this strange and deeply interesting statement, fearing others might have heard it. But her voice had been low, and the business of eating and drinking too fully engrossed every one else at table.

What could be the hold Mrs Leleu possessed over Sir Hubert? Surely none very effective, seeing that he had sent her away? But the point was worth investigating, and Gibbings would gladly have embraced any chance of remaining longer at the Hall to pursue his inquiry.

His good luck helped him.

Peters came in presently, blacker and more cross-grained than usual, and on hearing a friend was at table, drew near Gibbings, whom he at once recognised and addressed. But his greeting was the reverse of cordial.

"I might have guessed as much. I was sure

some one had been doing me a dirty turn, and of course it was you," he said fiercely.

"Come, come, Mr Peters," expostulated Gibbings; "fair and softly. What's amiss? What have I done to you?"

"I'll tell you out in the yard: there's room enough. Come out and take your coat off. I ain't so old a man that I can't give you a dusting. Come out, or I'll do it here," said the old coachman, with a threatening gesture.

"Gentlemen! gentlemen!" interposed the butler, "remember there's ladies in the room. You get out of this——" to Gibbings. "If Mr Peters don't know you, you haven't no right in here."

"None of your cheek. I'll go or stay, as it suits me. It depends on your master, who told me to come over, and you'd better take me to him."

"That's what I thought," cried Peters. "You've been poisoning the governor's mind against me. That's why he's given me the sack."

"I never spoke about you, or mentioned your name, you old fool!"

"Call me that again!" began Peters; when the butler, fearing a serious row, carried Gibbings off, saying—

"Sir Hubert's up by this time. Come along —I'll tell him you're here."

Gibbings was not kept waiting long.

"He'll see you—in there," said the butler, half opening a door which Gibbings remembered as that of the Spanish chamber, the best bedroom in the house.

The room in which Sir Percy Lezaire had breathed his last; the room in which Mrs Leleu had so strangely come upon the desk and documents that were to bring such a change over Straddlethorpe,—it was here that the present baronet spent half his mornings, bedraggled and bemused, just as he had tumbled out of the great tapestry, canopied, four-poster bed.

Here Gibbings found him, wrapped in a silk dressing-gown thrown carelessly over his nightshirt, with bare feet thrust into brocaded slip-

pers, hair dishevelled, chin unshorn. He lounged or lay in a wide easy-chair before a writing-table littered with bills and papers, on which stood a tall tumbler and cut-glass decanter. Pale face and bloodshot eyes told a tale of overnight debauchery and inward pangs, which morning drinks could hardly assuage.

"The blackguard thief!" began the baronet. "The low horse-coping scoundrel——"

"Meaning me, Sir Hubert?" asked Gibbings, with a smile.

"No; that cursed, cheating, gipsy-faced swindler, Peters. I've caught him in the very act. Harry Tamser warned me, but I wouldn't believe him. D'ye want a place, Gibbings? Take service with me."

"You're very good," answered Gibbings, but without enthusiasm. "I'm pretty well suited at this moment."

"You'd be far better off here at the Hall, and I believe I could trust you—you're not like that villain Peters."

"What's Peters done, Sir Hubert?" Gibbings wanted time to think over the offer.

"Sold me, a regular dog. It was about a pair of bays I bought at the fair. Two fifty Peters swore was the price, and I gave him the dibs to pay. Now I find—Tamser told me—that Peters only handed over a hundred and seventy; the rest he put in his pocket. That's only one of a dozen such tricks. Just look at this corn bill."

Gibbings followed Sir Hubert's hand, which pointed to the writing-table, and saw there the corn bill and something more.

It was a letter, addressed in a scrawling ill-formed hand to

"Mrs Leleu,
Buena Vista,
Bulkeley Wells."

"Can he be writing to her?" Gibbings asked himself at once. "In correspondence with a servant so recently discharged?" Surely there was ground for suspicion in this; it strangely

emphasised what Susan Footit, the housemaid, had overheard.

"Well, Sir Hubert," said Gibbings, now anxious to keep friends, "I never thought much of that Peters. I promise to serve you better than that. Would you engage me as coachman?"

"As stud-groom, master of the horse, confidential man; what you please, Gibbings. Any of the lads could drive, but I mostly handle the ribbons myself."

"When would you want me, Sir Hubert?"

"Now. I've just kicked Peters out, and I'd like you to take his place at once. What d'ye say?"

"Wages, sir?"

"Sixty, and all found. It's worth more than that, for I don't ask many questions, only I won't be robbed wholesale. Peters must have done me out of hundreds."

"It's a sin and a shame to take advantage, Sir Hubert, and you shall find no such fault with me. I'm your man."

Any last doubts were finally disposed of by the sight of an open cheque-book alongside the letter to Mrs Leleu. The page uppermost showed a cheque partly filled in—

"Pay Mrs Leleu, or order, two hundr——"

"Writing to her and sending her money! Beyond question she has him in her power. I'm in luck to get a chance of staying on at the Hall," were Gibbings's reflections as he went down-stairs. "I should be a fool now not to try and find out what all this means."

CHAPTER XLV.

THE POLICE AGAIN.

Gibbings fell into his place very quickly at the Hall. The other servants looked askance at him, fearing that as he had supplanted Peters he might betray them in their turn. It was a first principle with the Straddlethorpe servants, as with most others, that whatever went on below, honour forbade tale-bearing up-stairs.

But Gibbings had no idea of setting his fellow-servants against him. He was at the Hall for a particular purpose. His business was to watch and wait; to do this, he must live and let live, going his own way quietly, without pretending to be more honest or more virtuous than his companions. Any ill-feeling

on their part might make them suspicious and attract too much attention to himself.

His first and principal wish was to ingratiate himself with his new master. To do this he studied Sir Hubert's tastes and adapted himself to his ways. The former were low, the latter loose; but Gibbings was an old soldier who could take kindly to any line of life, more especially to one which promised him pleasant times. His duties as stud-groom were not severe; the general superintendence of the stables was the hardest part of them. The helpers did all the rough work, and Gibbings knew how to keep them at it. He himself was free to come and go as he liked after an early hour of the day, but it suited him best to be always handy — always at the baronet's beck and call.

The young fellow soon came to take a pleasure in Gibbings's society. He found that the old soldier could descant at length upon the two topics—horses and women—that had the deepest, the only interest for Sir Hubert Lezaire.

"Ah! but you should see them Spanish girls, Sir Hubert," said Gibbings one day as they were smoking together and chatting quite confidentially at the harness-room door.

Pretty Susan Footit had just tripped across the stable-yard, and Gibbings had noted the admiring look and wink that had followed her trim figure.

"What are they like? Dark, brown-skinned, slomachy? I like 'em fair, and neat, and plump—like yon."

"They've got light-haired ones too. *Rubias*, they call them—that's to say, red, ruby red. But such figures! They walk like queens. They don't walk; they do what our sergeant-major tried to teach the raw recruits—they glide."

"I don't fancy 'em, Gibbings. I know a gal'd give 'em three stone and a beating round any course."

"No need to tell me your taste, Sir Hubert; I can see that for myself. Beg pardon if I make too bold, but when's the happy day?"

Sir Hubert shook his head gloomily, then clenched his fist and struck it against the door-post.

"I don't get no forwarder, Gibbings. One day she's all smiles and smirks, the next scowls and sneers, and you may walk your chalks."

"Stick up to her, Sir Hubert. They're like horses; take 'em by the head and master 'em. They like you all the better when they give in."

"There's some one else before me, I'm thinking. If I was sure of it, I'd knife him." A murderous look crossed the young fellow's evil face.

Gibbings remembered Captain Sutton, but saw no reason, and felt indeed it would be unsafe, to tell Sir Hubert what he knew.

"Speak up to her, I say. Look what you've got to offer her. Few fellows would have any chance against you and all this," waving his hand towards the Hall and its surroundings.

"Maybe you're right. If I only had the pluck! But then there's this beastly Fieldus case."

"What's that, Sir Hubert?"

"The old sportsman who struck me—curse him!—at the fair. He's brought an action, damages £20,000. As she was under age—his daughter, you know—they may bring it in felony perhaps, and Tinson says I may have to go to jail. I can't think of it. It makes me mad. Come in and have a drain."

The sideboard in the Hall dining-room was always well garnished. Sir Hubert had developed a nice taste in liqueurs, and he now filled himself a claret-glassful of benedictine, while Gibbings took his Scotch cold — the whisky first neat, then the water.

"I think I'll go over to Hazelgrove," said Sir Hubert, emboldened by his nip. "I must see her. Ring, Gibbings, and tell them to saddle Devilskin."

Sir Hubert was already in the saddle, and was on the point of starting, when the butler came out, saying—

"Beg your pardon, Sir Hubert, but the police have called."

"The police! What do they want here? Who sent them?" Sir Hubert's voice shook slightly, and his sallow face changed colour.

"The inspector most particularly wishes to speak to you, Sir Hubert; said I was to tell you it was very important and couldn't wait."

"Where are they? How cursedly annoying!"

Was this strong language meant to feign unconcern?

"They are in the housekeeper's room, which I use now, Sir Hubert. They have got a prisoner with them—leastways some one they took up this morning."

"What's all that to me? I'm in a hurry, don't you see? Tell them to go to the nearest magistrate. I'm not on the bench."

It was rather a sore subject with Sir Hubert that the lord lieutenant had positively refused to put him in the commission of the peace.

"If I understood rightly, they wished to take your orders before proceeding in this case. But

here they are, Sir Hubert; the inspector will tell you himself."

At this moment two of the county constabulary in uniform came round the shrubbery from the offices; between them was a rough-looking, middle-aged man, in a suit of new corduroy, with a slouch-hat. He was clearly under restraint, although not actually a prisoner and handcuffed. Behind was a fourth person, our old acquaintance Mr Earswick, an inspector now, but still in plain clothes.

"Where is the inspector?" asked Sir Hubert, abruptly. "Why am I worried in this way? What does it all mean?"

Earswick stepped to the front, and touching his hat, civilly said—

"I am responsible for this, sir. These constables reported to me that they had seen this man loitering round the keeper's lodge near Bingley wood last night. We believe this morning he must have broken into it, from the look of the outer gate. The house is unoccupied, as I think you know."

No answer from Sir Hubert, who, from the moment the police approached him, had been fidgeting with his stirrup-leather and keeping his face averted.

"The fellow is an old convict," went on Earswick. "Blagrove here, a very old officer, has recognised him as a notorious poacher who was sent to penal servitude some nine or ten years ago. I have found that he is now on licence—in fact, he reported himself at Market Reepham two or three days ago. As a ticket-of-leave man he is liable to arrest if seen under suspicious circumstances, affording grounds for charging him with intent to commit a felony. So we laid hands on him this morning, and have brought him here to complete the case. Was your north lodge by Bingley broken into, sir, last night?"

Devilskin, Sir Hubert's horse, a tall, large-boned hunter, was very troublesome this morning. It had been fidgeting about while the police officer was speaking, and now began to plunge and half rear as though mad to make a start.

Gibbings, who had his eye on his master, traced the horse's restiveness to its right cause. Sir Hubert had been at him constantly with his spur.

All this time the prisoner had stood sullen and silent, with downcast eyes and the injured air of a man wrongfully accused.

Gibbings spoke for his master—

"We've heard nothing about any burglary here. It's another of your trumped-up cases. You're a fine lot, you Thorpeshire police."

Earswick winced, and answered angrily, surveying Gibbings from head to foot—

"Oh, it's you, is it? What brings you back to the Hall?"

"I'm not obliged to give an account of myself to you. Perhaps you'd like to take me into custody too, as a suspicious character."

Sir Hubert, who, seemingly to ease his horse, had ridden a few lengths away, now called Gibbings to him.

"Send them about their business," he said in a low voice, leaning over his saddle. "I

don't want to have anything to do with the case. They must act without me."

Gibbings communicated the message with alacrity, adding—

"Now, Mr Earswick, you'd better walk your chalks. Let this poor old devil go—you've got nothing against him. It's like you, getting the wrong sow by the ear."

"I shan't let him go: there's quite enough against him to run him in. Convicts on licence have no right to be loafing round gentlemen's parks, particularly old poachers; and the Bench shall deal with this chap this very day, with or without Sir Hubert Lezaire."

For the first time the prisoner lifted his head, and speaking with sudden animation, said—

"D'ye call yon chap Sir Hubert Lezaire?"

"That's about it," answered Gibbings. "Sir Hubert Lezaire, Baronet, Master of Straddlethorpe Hall, and the surrounding lands as far as you can see. And what might you call yourself when you're at home?"

"His name was Podifat when he was last in

"Well, but what took him to Bingley, I should like to know?" asked the little General. "He was clearly trespassing on the Lezaire property."

"Then let young Lezaire bring an action for trespass. I don't see it's our business to interfere."

"He was after the pheasants, I'll go bail. A rank old poacher."

"I agree with you, General," said Mr Lee, "and think he ought to be sent back to jail."

"Well, you're two to one. But we ought to hear anything the prisoner may have to say. His name is not quite unfamiliar, and he may have some excuse," protested Mr Etherly. "Ask him, General."

The foregoing conversation had passed in whispered tones amongst the magistrates, whilst Podifat in the dock below anxiously awaited their fiat.

"What have you got to say for yourself?" asked the General, abruptly. "What took you to Bingley? What were you after?"

"No harm. I used to live there, in the keeper's lodge. I only wanted to see the old place again."

"A very satisfactory reason," said Mr Etherly, *sotto voce.*

"When did you live there? In what capacity?" went on the General, less confidently.

"I was under-keeper in Sir Percy Lezaire's time."

"Can any one verify this?"

Blagrove, a veteran officer, at once corroborated the statement, which Mr Etherly also supported.

"Besides, I want to see my boy, the lad as I brought up and treated as my own child till they tore us apart."

Podifat said this in a whining, lachrymose tone, intended to express the deep-seated emotions of his affectionate heart.

"What boy?" asked the General, unguardedly, while Mr Etherly smiled maliciously, anticipating the reply.

"Him as is now master—the young baronet.

Little Hubie, whom I nussed and taught to make cartridges and tie flies."

"Our young friend's foster-father, in fact," whispered Mr Etherly to the General. "Do you still think he ought to go back to jail?"

The General looked as if he would like to have sent Podifat much farther than Market Reepham jail, and it was with rather a crest-fallen air that he admitted—

"I think perhaps we had better dismiss the case."

Podifat accordingly was set at large. As the prisoner left the court, General Wyndham-Parker left the bench. Taking Earswick aside, he said—

"Keep your eyes upon that man. I should like to know what becomes of him. He is bound to report himself, I suppose, to the police?"

"Here or elsewhere, sir."

"Elsewhere would be better. Why not get him to go out of the neighbourhood?"

"It might be done, sir. He's a kind of chap that'd go anywhere for a consideration."

"Well, just find out, will you, what he will take to go—say to London, or the Hebrides, or the Isle of Man? He can only be an annoyance to Sir Hubert Lezaire if he remains in Thorpeshire. Only let me know what's his price."

General Wyndham-Parker, be it understood, had no intention of paying it, however small. The cost would, of course, fall on the young baronet, whom he intended to see without a moment's loss of time. His desire was speedily fulfilled, for on his return to Hazelgrove he found Sir Hubert there at lunch.

The baronet was not in the best of spirits. He sat black and gloomy at an almost untasted meal. Only the General's dry sherry—none of the best—had found favour with his would-be son-in-law. But the wine, having little effect upon his seasoned brain, had soured rather than exhilarated him.

Miss Etta, too, had been more than usually ungracious. It was one of Sam's days; a letter from her absent lover, received that morning, completely filled her thoughts.

After lunch, more sulky and cross-grained than ever, Sir Hubert asked for a brandy-and-soda, which he drained at one gulp.

"You seem out of sorts to-day," said the General, sympathetically. "By George! I'm not surprised."

"Hey! What? How do you mean?" asked Sir Hubert, startled.

"Why, of course about Podifat. To think of the old rogue showing his face at Straddlethorpe again!"

"You know that? Then you have seen him. Are you sure?"

"Certain. He was before us to-day at Petty Sessions. The police brought him up for infringing the conditions of his licence."

"And what did you do with him?" asked Sir Hubert, eagerly. "Sent him back to jail, I hope—or further."

"We couldn't, although I wished it. But he ought to go away, and will, I think, if you make it worth his while."

"How is it to be managed? I'm ready to do

what's right. I don't want to have him on my back, you may be sure."

"I daresay I can do it for you, through the police, if only you authorise it. How much will you give?"

"Anything in reason, so long as I don't see him again. I leave it all to you."

Through the good offices of his friend General Wyndham-Parker, Sir Hubert was spared a personal visit from his foster, or more exactly once putative, father. Podifat consented to take a lump sum, fifty pounds down, and a weekly allowance of two sovereigns, on condition he did not come within twenty miles of Straddlethorpe.

But at the end of the first week old Podifat had broken the agreement. Either the condition was irksome, or Podifat wanted more; for he reappeared at Straddlethorpe, coming boldly now to the Hall door and asking openly for Sir Hubert. A very different man to the slouching unkempt creature whom the police had run foul of, and captured red-handed, as they thought, in Bingley wood.

Podifat had applied a portion of the funds provided by his liberal patron to the purchase of new clothes. Memories of his old calling as gamekeeper had governed his choice. He was arrayed in great glory: clean drab gaiters adorned his short bandy legs, and glossy velveteens his thick-set figure, while a gorgeous yellow kerchief, tied loosely, encircled his brawny neck, and threw up into strong relief his walnut dark face, and the coarse curly black hair, still scarcely streaked with white.

He gave his name impudently to the butler, and would take no denial.

"Sir Hubert not in? Lies! I saw him pass the lodge. He's got to see me right away. Say that now, and don't you keep me waiting long."

The brusque threatening tone of the message must have been passed on to Sir Hubert, for the young baronet was not at his ease when he received Podifat. But he faltered out a slight protest.

"Didn't you promise to clear out, to go away and keep away?"

"Yah! 'Twarn't good enough, Masser Hubie —Sir Hubie, suppose I orter say. Can't bear not to see you oftener, sonny."

"Get out, you grinning jackass!" cried the master suddenly to the butler, who, having introduced the visitor, still stood familiarly inquisitive at the door.

Purfrey fled, and thus only a garbled and incomplete report reached the servants' hall. But already tongues had been wagging shrewdly, and the return of the master's foster-father was freely discussed down-stairs. No one remembered Podifat personally, but strange traditions still survived of the wild life he had led. To these were soon added many stories, and much scandalous gossip about the queer doings that followed his reappearance at Straddlethorpe.

The old fellow soon seemed master of the situation. He came and went constantly, and did always much as he pleased. After his second visit, but his first really formal call, he took up his residence at the north lodge, his old home, where he lived a solitary, but—to

judge from the furniture and supplies sent in —a not quite joyless life. He was called an under-keeper, but he took no orders from any one, and accepted none of the responsibilities, discharged none of the duties, of the post. All he cared for was the licence Sir Hubert took out for him to shoot and fish,—the first with the splendid Purdey he himself picked out of the gun-room at the Hall, the latter with the first-class fishing-tackle similarly supplied.

Certain coverts, a particular length of stream, were reserved for old Podifat's own use. Why?

A little because Sir Hubert did not choose that his foster-father should run up against the more aristocratic sportsmen who came by invitation to the Hall; more because Podifat had expressed his sovereign dislike of being crowded up and interfered with by strangers.

It was quite clear that the old poacher's will was law at the Hall. Sir Hubert was even

more afraid than ashamed of the man who had been his guardian in early years.

No one saw this sooner or more plainly than Gibbings. But for once the shrewd veteran was at fault, and unable to explain the riddle.

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